

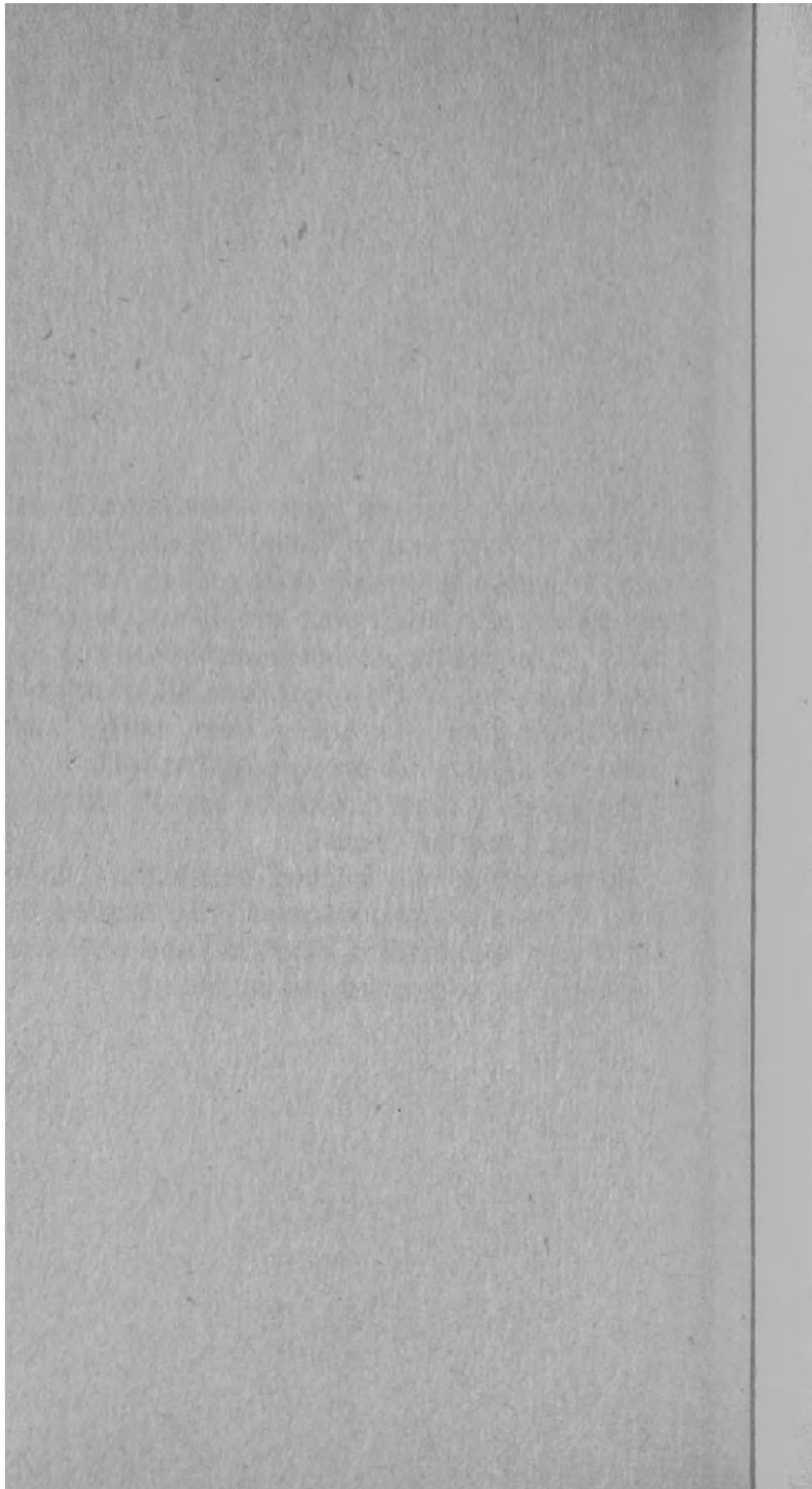


"Just like all hustlers," said a man who sat next to Rono. His face sagged like melted wax, his delicately-ringed fingers made wide arcs as he talked and his cigarette was thrust into a long, sequined holder. "You can't trust one no more than you can put faith in one of them convicts out of Angola. They'll ruin you . . . I know. Them natty, male bitches have sure run me through the mill."

Surprised, I came swiftly to Jesse's defense. "He's not a hustler," I said.

Rono and the man laughed, scoffingly. "You're naive," the older man snapped. "He hustled you out of your Thunderbird, didn't he? And what else, I wonder, has he hustled you out of. . . ?"







# JESSE

by  
Carl Corley

All characters and situations in  
this book are fictitious

A PEC  
FRENCH-LINE NOVEL



Copyright © 1968 by Publishers Export Co., Inc.  
P. O. Box 20127  
San Diego, California 92120

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, without express permission from the publisher in writing.

Printed in the United States of America

## *Author's note—*

Jesse is truly characteristic of our hustler today. Whether he hustles his own sex or the opposite, his objective is the same in either case ... sex in exchange for money.

This is their chosen occupation, of hustlers freely of their own making, but predominately because of their past environment. They are driven most of the time, thriving on privation and miserable filth. Sometimes they are happy, but they never live happily together. When in the presence of enemies they swiftly unite, but when sheltered and secure they turn on one another.

Hustlers are vain and their interests are fickle. In one moment they are pleased with themselves, the next they are bored. Their dreams are wild nightmares of terror and struggle, of hunger and want. A hustler's anger, in comparison with the fury of an aroused he-male it is usually little more than bluster and buff. Yet, he is ready to sacrifice his life when enraged by jealousy of a score or a paying mate and, like the female, the hustler scorned is more deadly than the typical male.

Hustlers are not migratory, rather they are nomadic. They wander throughout the year, confined only by the boundaries of each group's domain. No matter what lush feeding-grounds they come to in the bars, or taverns of a city, or in a haven of safety some client has bestowed upon them, they are constantly and restlessly on the move, never spending more than one or two



months in a spot. This nomadism, a part of their heritage, has grown out of fear.

But whatever they are, however we condemn them, these strange and violent people belong to the bloodstained and bestial part of the human race.

Carl V. Corley

## *Prologue*

Jesse Lee Thames, awakening with a terrific jolt, had heard the owl hoot: he was soused, puddled, sozzled, inebriated, intoxicated. In other words, he was stoned!

"I'm only half Indian," he cried rakishly, as his throbbing head spun in frightful, red memories of the previous night when some punk from Port Allen's Goldcoast had called him a stinking, red-necked, Indian Son-of-a-bitch, something Jesse didn't take from any man. The grimy rat-faced punk had added that his mother must have been a dirty squaw whore, and it was then that Jesse had torn the honkytonk apart.

Lifting his agonized head from the blood-stained pillow, he fell back dizzily, bright yellow circles whirling round and about him, and he lay there quietly for a moment, thinking of last night's brawl, hearing again in his fractured brain the yells, the cursing, the screaming women, glass breaking, tables and chairs crashing to the floor, bodies falling; felt again, but this time more painfully, hard knuckles against his face, his chest, his arms. With a great effort of his weakened strength...a strength almost savage...he managed to prop himself up on one elbow. God! What a night! Flashes of bright lights went off and on in his whirling brain like Roman candles on the Fourth of July, and little silvery sparks shot out from the corners of his eyes...where the pain hurt the worst. He opened his eyes and found one of them stuck together, where the blood had dried, and the



other one felt puffed, bruised. His lip hurt too, and he could taste blood on his tongue and he could hardly breathe, so caked were his nostrils with blood. He glanced at his hands in deep regret for last night, saw that the knuckles were peeled back like the skin on a lemon, and there were a number of gashes criss-crossing, like the claws of a woman's nails, across his wrists and forearms. One elbow was skinned, the loss of hide completely baring the bone, and there was a dug-out place on his knee-cap the size of a beer bottle top.

"Well, that punk had it coming," he muttered out loud, paining at the slightest movement of his jawbone. "Hope the motherfucker is in the hospital!"

He tried to slide his naked legs over the side of the bed, but in doing so, exerting his remaining strength, the whirling 'round in his head became more rapid, the dizziness assailed him and, blacking out completely, his naked body went over the side of the bed and onto the floor with a thud. He lay there, in a limbo as black as any death, his head bent beneath his shoulders, his long legs, up to his crotch, still pressed against the bed, like a prisoner stretched on a torture rack. Pain and all remnants of life seemed to leave him then and he slept again in this twisted position ... unknowing that this was the ancient cure of his Choctaw Indian ancestors, to sleep off their wounds, to neither eat nor drink until the balm-ing process of slumber had sealed over their pains.

He awakened again when the sun was breaking in through his window at four in the evening

and, like a beaten animal, he pulled himself up wearily, with a deep determination the Indian God Abba Inca would have admired, and went to the bathroom. Without being shocked he glanced into the mirror, noticed the swollen puffs around his eyes, his cut lip, the gash over his right brow, but without flinching at the visible scars, the pain or surprise. He knew what to expect. This wasn't the first time he had gotten into a brawl, and he sensed, without knowing it, that it wouldn't be his last.

What else did he have to live for...since Jackie?

Nothing!

Life had been nothing to him but unsalted food since his five-month-old-son had died of diabetes ten months ago and his wife had left him, due to his inability to wrest himself above the stagnancy of deep and mournful grief. Like most people of savage inheritance, especially among men—and never more so than with the Indian, who frequently commits suicide over the death of a son, and, who, in grief have been known to burn all their possessions—he had tried, but in vain, to drown his acute unhappiness over his infant son, whom he had worshipped, and the loss of his beautiful dark-haired wife. Not that he was approaching the mania of the alcoholic. His tough-fibered mind was not in tune with that sort of deplorable weakness. Neither was his lithe body, which possessed the physical endurance to throw off any malfunctions that might chance to attack his health, his joyful attitude toward life (which had set him so apart from his fellows during his younger times) or the



violence to which his body had become adjusted during the hard knocks of his youth.

Jesse was five feet eleven inches tall, and his one hundred and seventy-one pounds was so distributed over his well-proportioned bone structure that not an ounce of fat showed. For his twenty-six years of life he was now in the glory of full blossom, his bulging muscles and perfection of contour keyed to an exquisite pitch. Lithe as a willow wand, endowed with that animal grace of movement, like a panther walking on velvet, he was now at his best. Beautiful, flowing rhythms ran through his dark body, gushing through his every rich vein the virile tenor of his life, and every movement he made, however slight, advertised his lust for living, his versatile profusion of moods and passions, his urge to savor to the hilt every waking and sleeping moment, to drink of life a wanderer in the desert, to become drunk and drugged on life like a fantastic and perfect elf addled on poppy seeds. Life to him was a marathon, a race he must win, or die young in the attempt.

No puppet on a string, to be guided and directed and dictated to, he wrested life by the horns and twisted it to his will, like he used to do the bull calves back on a farm in Mississippi at gelding time. Jubilation, competitiveness and zest ran rampant through his veins, leaping like forest-fires and burning within him this restlessness of the spirit, this lust of the physical life. Something, or someone, had set him aflame, and had struck life to his handsome dark frame and now, kindled nightly with the life of the streets, that anarchic world of honkytonks and dance-

halls and bars, of music and noise and darkness teeming with coarse and arduous sex, the flame burned brighter, hotter, roaring through his system, galvanizing him into motivations and reverberating drives over which he had no absolute control. There were many dark inroads to his life since he had lost his wife and baby, and he could take any one of them or several at once and come up with a hell of a good time.

This restlessness, too, added to his zest an essence from his primitive nature which never seemed to tire; like a wolf on a steady trail through the forest, a shadow amid shadows, and when the urge came—that unforeseen voice from the wilds—he would rise from bed at any hour of the night, dress in clothes for which he had no concern, and answer its haunting call.

He had answered that call the previous night and now, standing before the full-length mirror which served as his clothes closet door, he gave his naked body a careful inspection, gauging what damage the night before had visited on him, the repair work he would have to do on his person before he could rearm himself for future victories. Jesse was certain last night had been a victory for him. He was not of the mettle to recognize defeat; even if it stared him in the face. The history of the Choctaws was lined with scars from both victory and defeat; and he had brought those scars into the modern world. Scars were his badge of honor now, and he wore them as few men could without self-consciousness.

Jesse's face was not the profile on the American nickel so many people regard as the



exact face of the Indian. Though he did have high cheek-bones, wide-set eyes and extended brows; his nose was not the common hawk nose depicted in so many paintings. It was the nose of the Greeks, with one exception that it was turned up on the tip end, which gave to his features an almost "little boy" look. His lips sliced his skull, broad in width, with an expressive underlip, and a top lip which shaped itself to his emotions which, at times, provoked pity, sorrow, a look of hurt, skepticism, and ... quivering at times, turning in with their softness ... the utter softness of his heart; at times pliable to his weeping, a shapeless, trembling mass of flesh, which happened often, compelling those who saw him to weep themselves. A thin white scar ran around the lower contour of his left jaw and chin, which added to, rather than detracted from his rugged good looks. His hair was straight and black, shiny as a crow's wing and as fine as silken thread. This he combed in a tumbling mass over his brow, and back over his ears to a long point at the nape of his neck.

Though thick in its mass, it was as unpredictable as his nature; falling recklessly over his arched eyebrows when he tossed his head, as a stallion will do when alerted by another in the same pasture. His eyes were hazel, flecked with tiny bits of brown, and the whites were like marble, amazingly so, even after a drunk. Eyes so pale and expressive they could command or condemn, could beguile and conquer, could burn in their pale lights, could speak of the wild and restless passion that roamed in his groin.

His shoulders were exceptionally broad for one

of his slight height and built, and rounded beautifully over smooth forearms and biceps laced with long, strutted veins. Hair, as silky-fine as the hair on his head, lay flatly over the rounded shields of his chest, and ran a dark line down the center of his flat belly to his naval, a dimple crowning his narrow waist and cowboy hips. His legs were Michelangelo's David, rounded and satin smooth of thigh, hairless, and to hard-defined knees and ankles, with long tapering toes which gave to his feet that forked look, that deliberately elongated look depicted in all Greek and Roman statues. Down his inner thighs and heavy, field-hardened calves, ran a series of wild veins, giving to his lithe build extra strength and force, like the heavy strutted veins on a stallion's flanks. And where these tremulous veins curling around his thighs came to join at his crotch, here lay the secret to his wildness, his eternal craving for life, his deep and awesome and beautiful hungers.

From his dimpled naval a fine line of hair, almost like a soft pencil mark, carried the glance to the crotch, where the black nest of hair, curling and wild, surrounded his maleness and gave to the whole of his dark, smooth body its primitive accent—the ultimate reason for his existence, the flesh key to his gusty will for life and love, the primitive call to thrill and ecstasy and physical rapture. Out of this nest of foamy blackness protruded his enormous organ, dangling dark purplish, like a young stallion's, restless for sexual fulfillment, sculptured with a perfection bordered on genius, perfectly formed through the evolution of man, good health, rich-



ness of desire, enormous by its dark, mushroomed head, its slitted end which from deep within would come the gushing nectar of life; and below that, in their dark plastic skins, hung his balls, rich and ripe, like melons in the warm furrows of his thighs.

Charmed, as only the male can be charmed, by his own virile swarthiness, his dark brown skin glowing with radiant health and utterly without blemish (save his battle-scars) he made a startling picture of the male personified in his golden reflection. And somehow, deep and hidden within him, he seemed to know this as his eyes went over his own body, as the stallion knows its own eudaemonia as it leaps and bounds and rears upon its chosen mare. He knew this as he knew his own strength, as he knew his own determination, his own primitive ways for survival. Uneducated, but with a mind as keen as a double-edged sword, as savage and as elemental as his Indian decendents, he sensed, with a knowledge as instinctive as the beasts of hill and cave, the power which charged his being. He knew—he felt acutely—as he felt to the hilt the climax of sex, the pains of hunger, the blood-letting of wounds, these fantastic fires which roamed through his every vein, accented his potential as a man, the exact maleness that was himself.

It seemed, as he stood there eyeing himself in the full-length mirror, that he was seeing his handsome, naked body for the first time, that he too was the first man, the first perfect being coming full-grown out of the dark, damp heart of earth, clad not in the torn and stained garments

of the hectic, modern day world, but in the festive beauty of his nakedness, which brought out the very best in him. The grave strengths made manifold by the slow moving grace of each muscle, the force one could see in the creeping network of veins crawling over his satin thighs, down his long, wiry arms, into the tips of his long, expressive fingers, the ferocity of his naked body as a whole, the magnificence, the perfect harmony of flesh and bone and contour when they are assembled and worked together as a sculptor may work in marble, radiant and dark and animal, pure animal, were visible now in the completed work.

He was one of nature's perfect works, a being of both ironic and fatal fashioning. For nature, in her vast and unscrupulous heart, has one genius. When she has created a perfect thing, she too also permits herself the indulgence of plotting its destruction.

So Jesse ... because he was born and had blossomed into one of nature's perfect creations ... that nature boy wonder ... would become everyone's victim of love, would be sought after and adored and admired, would be, by his boyishness and his handsomeness and his honesty, a victim of the flesh pots and one of the spoils of human hunger. Degraded, demoralized, his fine body plundered and abused, he would go on and on to his final, tragic ending. At full march, with a momentum of funereal import, as if he went in tune to the throttle of music—a wild and frantic rhythm that would rush him to the brink—he would go on with every nerve taut, with every fiber of his being striving, would go on with



panting, bursting heart, his soul in his feet. Forever desperate now, lost, frantic, exhausted but, even sodden with weariness and fatigue, his nerves disheveled, his tortured mind ravished, he would neither know nor want a moment's rest in his dark and reckless race to the deep.

Jesse would go because he had lost his way in the dark caverns of the streets, in the hell-holes that were bars and lounges and roadside honky-tonks. He would grope numbly, uncertain, because his heart had become embalmed in grief. Eyeless in the world of the unseeing. He would go because life had given him that first, fatal push. Everything from now on would be downhill. And he wouldn't stop until he reached the bottom, so deep in darkness that he would never be able to crawl back up, or to see where he was going unless a certain hand reached down mercifully and pulled him back . . . back into his old, wonderfully-clean world of love and hope and faith.

But, he shrugged bitterly, thinking about his past for a brief moment and angered by his wounded face, considered that things like love and hope and faith were forever gone from him now, so distant in his memory of his life they seemed more like a child's story tale than actuality.

No one would ever help him get back into shape again. For no one cared. No one gave a damn whether he lived or died . . . not even Jackie! Least of all her.

Jackie!

At the thought of her a kind of terror moved in his brain, stirring that old restlessness, that haunting call to do something, anything that

would take his mind off her. If only he could forget. If only he could forget he had ever met and married her. If only he could forget their son . . . that they had ever had a son.

Freedom from grief! His mind and heart were in a cage, tightly locked up, and he longed to tear himself free, longed frantically to pick up where he had left off with her, to fill his life with meaning instead of this vast, lonely emptiness.

God! . . . this emptiness!

With an angry, impatient jerk, he took the wash cloth from its rack, soaked it in cold water and tried to wash away the dried blood from his face and hands. The rough cloth irritated but he did not flinch, nor did he make a sound. He had known pain. He knew how to suffer, for he had suffered. And the more he suffered the more he could endure. No one could hurt him, physically. He was an agile demon in a fight, though he hated with a terror, the sounds of a fist against a face, of knuckles against bone, that dull, death sound . . . the most awesome sound in the world!

Giving up on the washing, he raked a razor over his face hurriedly, took a few precious, well-loved moments combing back his long black hair, making certain those curled locks tumbled over the center of his brow, low between his glittering eyes, and gave his reflection a quick look.

Shades would cover his bruised eyes, he concluded, not giving a damn really, and he thought the gash on his lip made him look "tough" or, "tougher than usual."

He never wore underwear of any kind and, as he pulled his faded, torn bluejeans up his dark,



smooth thighs his enormous prick flapped over the material like a wiggling, coiling snake.

"Let it all hang out!" he cried aloud, a little impatient with his tool, remembering a line from the popular song played constantly on all the honkytonk juke-boxes. Taking hold of it playfully, he shoved it roughly (it could be treated rough and he loved it) into his pants leg and whipped up the stubborn zipper, which tried to catch in his curling pubic hair. He slipped into his black boots, a relic from better days, and faded shirt with bright yellow and red paisley prints.

Once more he glanced into the mirror. Shit! He looked like hell! There was a hole in his jeans where the naked flesh of his behind showed through, and the wrinkled, hair-oil soaked collar of his shirt had a tear in it two inches long, the threads fuzzed, dangling. Too, his face looked pale and drawn, his lips pulled tightly over his teeth, caused by strain and nervousness from too much drink, and his eyes looked haggard, dull morose. He put a hand to one eye, and noticed angrily how stained it was, streaked now with purple skin bruises and dabs of dried blood. He noticed his hand too. It trembled, the knuckles torn, with shreds of skin hanging loosely. His nails were cut, a thick dam of dirt beneath them, and tobacco stain had dyed two of his fingers a dark, fecal brown. He held them closer and examined them, remembering, with a dart of anger and pain, how his hand had once looked when he was with Jackie, clean; his long fingers boasting tapering nails; rings, an expensive Piaget wristwatch with its rich, woven gold,

initial bracelet. Now look!

He held both of them up, fingers tip to tip, and watched their tremble. He recalled that everyone had once thought he had expressive hands, that his long clean fingers were so nimble, so deliberate with their movements. What they caught hold of they held. They could be like steel or, in moments of passion, soft and pliable as a surgeon's. And they had always been warm ... so decidedly warm! Now they looked cold, dead, wrinkled—the badges of his defeat!

"I'll get it all back, someday," he murmured half-heartedly, as though he didn't believe it himself. "I'll be like I used to be. And I'll have clothes like I used to, and a car and money and ..."

In a rash of sudden despair he flung open his closet door and peered in. It was swallowed up in darkness, the old, moldy-smelling paper stripped from the inner walls. A haggard line of empty coat hangers held only one faded, long-sleeved, green shirt hanging askew, a pair of soiled jeans wadded upon the floor, a pair of fruity red socks he had borrowed from a friend, and a T-shirt as black as the floor.

He slammed the door shut, picked up his dark glasses from the top of a scarred chest of drawers, and searched frantically for a cigarette. He found a soiled, grimy butt in an ash tray beside the bed, thrust it into his sore mouth, lit it and, seeing a beer can beside the tray, he picked it up and shook it violently. There was still some in it and he gulped it down in one long swallow.

He screwed up his mouth, as it went down into his guts.



"Hot as mule piss!" he grumbled.

For a pensive, undecided moment, though he possessed the frantic urge to move, to get going somewhere, anywhere—he lifted the torn plastic window shade and looked out on Government street. People were in rushing clutters, anxious to get home from work, and cars were beginning to line up under the red lights, horns honking, pedestrians shouting. He noticed the police station across the street, the "fuzz" getting in and out of their parked patrol cars with their new, fancy blue beacon lights, and he gave them the index finger. The Confederate flag was flying at half mast near the statue in the square, directly below that of the bright blue Louisiana state flag, and there were funeral wreaths around the base of the bronze rebel soldier. He wondered, with a loss of memory, what could be the occasion . . . Army Day, or Veterans Day, or Pearl Harbor day, or something like that. He didn't keep up with the war. He didn't even know which side the globe Viet Nam was on. And he cared less. A lot of boys getting shot up for nothing.

A girl came down the street. He watched her for a moment, like a cat at a mouse hole. She was blonde, wore a mini skirt of bright blue plastic and cat boots with high heels. She went into the Boulevard lounge. He got a good glimpse of her behind and rubbed his crotch lovingly.

He glanced at himself in the mirror. He'd never get a piece of ass looking like this!

Rotten! He was pure rotten!

Maybe a free drink then?

Who would buy him a drink looking like this?

Doggedly he shoved the dark shades over his sore eyes, went out the door, giving it a slam, and down the rickety wrought iron steps to the noisy street.

\* \* \*

Bruce's Lounge was jumping. A number of mathaired students from L.S.U. were rattling away on the two pin-ball machines near the entrance as Jesse went in, and the pool tables were surrounded with the town's punks: rat faced cajuns, dark Frenchmen, swarthy Creoles, all bathed in billows of blue cigarette smoke. They were making as much noise as possible knocking the brightly-colored balls down the length of the billiard tables, not an expert in the crowd, but all bickering, jawing at one another, clamorous in trying to win enough change for a hot meal, a smoke, a beer or two.

Along the bar, dockhands and laborers from the Municipal docks in Port Allen sat elbow to elbow, and intermixed with them, hopeful of a free drink, sat a number of bar-girls, waiting patiently for offers which hardly ever came. Around one of the formica-topped tables near the red plush walls sat a number of Greek shipmen from the freight ship, the "Iliad" which lay moored in the harbor, between the old and new river bridges. And here and there, infiltrating the vacant places, were students, office workers, a hustler or two, a stag woman, a haggard old wino who kept begging drinks, a has-been prostitute trying to make it with a young sailor, who kept saying drunkenly: "Will you screw me



please!" and a girl costumed grotesquely in a rakish attempt at looking "way out," one of the flower children; her Cleopatra eyes surveying the dark dungeon of a bar with serpent-like stares, her broomstraw hair like a shroud down the sides of her milky-white face, her too-plump neck strung with worry beads, a badge with 69 written on it, lavender snake hose, and a paper flower she had snatched from McCory's Five and Ten.

Julie, a trim, blonde coquette who worked the bar, stood at the multi-colored jukebox tapping her ringed fingers to the exact cadence of "Cheryl's Going Home," while Jesse, standing mutely in the center of the lounge, not knowing what to do exactly, now that he was in, and wishing desperately she would drop in the quarter she dangled over the slots and play the tune which had haunted him for days, summing up his world, his agonizing past: "Child of Clay."

Outside, motorcycles growled like demons out of hell, flooding Third street with a bombardment of hollow sounds. Memory from the previous night raked at Jesse's brain. Whirling round, as if jerked by invisible strings, he rushed back to the entrance, peered out the tiny glass window cut into the door. His Honda was still intact, parked like a gleaming red charger near the curb, its shiny red and silvery-chrome trim glistening picking up and reflecting wildly the multi-colored neon tubing along the canopy in front of the lounge. It was still there, safe. And the sudden terror which had galvanized him into seeking its safety ebbed suddenly to blessed relief. It was the only thing he had of value in the world, a sixty-seven Honda paid for by the

work and sweat of his brow and, because it was his, his alone, and because it was all he owned of any material value, it was to him the most precious possession in his life. In fact it was his life. And because of this proud ownership, because it gleamed so, like a forbidden coin of pure gold, because its eerie glisten, its gaudy dazzle reminded him so sharply of his own wretchedness by comparison, its grandeur intensifying his own despair, the acute drabness of his existence, it became as a sword and shield to him, which he bore between him and the cruelty of the world, a weapon which he thrust out to others and cried, almost with bitterness and rebellion;

"Don't touch it! It is mine!"

This cry of desperation he also allied with himself; his own handsome body (though he was unaware of it) cried it silently when cheap whores tried to paw him; when those wretched souls of ill-will and evil intent tried to use his body for their pleasures, offering him a drink, a meal a night's lodging for the strength of his strong young limbs, the glory of his maleness, the dark, grave beauty that lay dormant in the hollow of his thighs. He wanted none of them, their painted mouths, their limp, aged arms, their soiled and tainted bodies, the looseness of their sex . . . not since Jackie.

In his tortured heart and mind, though he did not have the cunning nor the foresight to sense it then, he wanted no one but her, and everyone else's bodies, for their kisses, their shoddy love, he had no desire, and they were but vague, shadowy beings to him, compared to Jackie



ghosts that, like him, stalked these filthy streets, searching, haunted, revolted by life, by love, by the desperate need for love, by the rebellious rage which, with mute silence, one wears when obsessed by privation and want.

Jackie was like a rose growing in a field of torn and fragile weeds, as she was a woman compared to these filthy hags, a madonna face amid these haggard harridans of the streets.

The perfect madonna face, the child woman, the men like him—men who dared to dream over the ages—would search for, tirelessly. To him she was the one face in a million faces, the only one with eyes and nose and mouth, the only one that breathed ... that really, truly breathed. Jackie was life, while every other woman to him was made of dry, brittle chalk.

So through this life of the streets, in which he so unknowingly and with such unpreparedness found himself one drunken night, the life he could no longer leave, he moved as if in a dream.

So, now, turning from the doorway, satisfied only momentarily that his most precious possession was safe, he moved through the blur of faces, faces drowned in the fogs of cigarette smoke, faces indistinguishable, faces which had no meaning, no bearing on his life, faces he had seen a thousand times in this grimy bar, but actually not seen, masks that moved and talked and dreamed.

As if one of the shadows himself, a shadow among shadows, he fumbled pretentiously in his jeans for the price of a beer. He wanted to sit down, to pretend he belonged, but without a drink on his table he knew he would look like a

bum, or worse, a hustler. And, God! how he hated a hustler!

Mercifully, he came up with the sum of forty cents, a quarter, a nickel and a dime and he ordered a drink. The waitress brought it over, a tiny, doll-like creature with black, high-piled hair, obviously a lacquered wig, and shot him an insolent glance from eyes so heavily made up she looked as if she was peering at him through a velvet mask.

"Thanks, Dusty," he murmured, trying not to look at her, her immaculate sky blue jersey, her skin-tight capris, her Japanese high heels. She was so clean, so fragile, he figured she would crack like china if he laid a finger on her. And this cleanliness, intensified by her radiant cologne, Tigress, actually, by Faberge (which he remembered Jackie having worn on a number of occasions) brought up sharply his own filth, his bruised and torn face, his utter privations.

When she left, her torso moving unjointedly like a ringing bell, her high spiked heels tapping regularly to the rapid beat of, "I Want Candy," on the bellowing jukebox, he fumed silently over not having a cigarette between his lips. And more than a nicotine urge was a deep insatiable hunger which gnawed in his guts. He had not eaten for two days, though he had drunk like drink was going out of style, having run into two buddies out at a bar on Florida avenue who had a fifth of gin, and had ended at the Riviera in Port Allen, his silvery pride and joy abandoned, lost to his new love, his luckily-found drunkenness. To the renewal of his faith, in something he



could not remember, trace, or name, he had found it at dawn, unharmed, the dew from the Mississippi dulling its magnificent sheen, its newness profaned, as if it had sat awaiting for him, during the long hours of his drunken night, with a broken heart.

He would never leave it again, he thought, musing, as he made circles on the table with his sweating beer glass. His motor was his status symbol, if he could call it that, and without it, without the gloating over it from other boys, their eyes envious, jealous, he was doomed.

A girl at the bar, who might have been pretty if she had kept her figure, which now was grotesquely plump, turned and eyed him repeatedly. Though he noticed her through his shades, he did not smile his honest, shy smile, even though she held up her glass and pointed, in indication that she was buying, for he did not want to appear as a hustler.

To hell with all women ... now that he no longer had Jackie!

He glanced into the watery mirror of his beer, hoping that he would see her reflection there in the golden depths, as she would always be reflected in his heart. He saw only glazed and continuing emptiness. And he wondered forlornly where she might happen to be tonight, who she was with; was she laughing and happy, or sad and in tears?

He hoped she was happy. He loved her that much. Even if she was happy with someone else. No! God! he *couldn't* hope that. Fate did not intend that he be that unselfish. He cared for her too much to stand by while she was in the arms

of another man, even if that other man made her happy, even if he, Jesse, was lost forever to her life, her love, her thoughts.

Got to get a job, he thought despairingly, stay sober, buy some better clothes, quit looking like a tramp. Maybe, maybe if he could pull out in time, get back on his feet, show her that he could stay sober, leave the honkytonks alone, then—then she might take him back, and life and love and happiness would flow once more through his empty, lonely veins.

A ratty, toothless punk sprawled down beside him.

“Buy me a drink, Jesse!”

“I’m broke,” Jesse answered, his reverie broken, and he did not even favor the kid with a glance.

“Ah, come on, man,” the boy implored, lisping, the sound of his voice rolling through the deep hollow of his mouth and over his visible tongue, made by the absence of his teeth. “Didn’t I see you at the Riviera last night, spending dough like you owned the First National? Don’t tell me, man!”

“It all went down the shit-hole,” Jesse grunted, and they both laughed a haunted laugh. “Just like every red cent I can get my hands on . . . booze . . . booze . . . booze.”

“You oughta put some back, under your mattress or something,” the boy advised, giving him hungry, animal eyes, eyes sunken from his own inebriation. “Save something to feed your face.”

“Look who’s talking,” said Jesse, taking his time on his beer. “I’ve seen you going around for days with your gut growling just because you



blew your wad at some club or on some chick."

"Like you with that dago slut ... what's her name?"

"Myrtle ... you mean?" Jesse tried to be coy.

The boy chuckled.

"You know damn well she's who I mean. I hate them dagos with a fuckin' passion."

"Cause you're a dago yourself, eh, Rono?"

This riled him plenty.

"I ain't no dago, Jesse. I'm Italian ... south Italian."

"Alright! Alright!" Jesse cried back, worn to a frazzle over this small talk, but as was his nature, wanting to keep peace. He hated arguments.

The boy called Rono gave Jesse a sheepish look, then got down to business. He put both elbows on the table and leaned forward, as if he was participating in a conspiracy.

"What you got lined up for tonight, Jesse?"

Jesse gave him a cock-eyed look, then glanced away in acid disgust.

"Nothing."

"I think I'll mosey over to the Boulevard," Rono said, trying to make it sound important. "Maybe I can score. Then, if I don't make out I'll shag-ass it down to the Mirror Room. I can always pick up a five in there."

"Is that all you're worth?"

"I don't see you wearing diamond rings."

"Cause I don't hustle."

"Hell, Jesse, you have to hustle where the money is. And it's in the Boulevard or the Mirror Room or the Den out on Florida."

Jesse gave him the go to hell look.

"You and your fucking friends."

Rono's expression waned to acute guilt.

"Well—er," he stammered. "It's better than starving."

Jesse said defiantly: "I'd rather starve."

"Okay," Rono replied, flinging his hands wide. "Go ahead and starve. Not me, daddyo! Not as long as I can sell my tail."

Jesse had no answer for that. He sat silently, staring at his thin fingers curled around his beer glass, and considered how terrible starving really was. But the other seemed worse. He'd make it somehow, no matter how dim things seemed tonight. Hadn't he always made it, somehow?

"Down in the dumps, eh?" Rono asked, his expression thoughtful of someone else for a change, instead of always on himself.

"I'm on cloud nine," Jesse replied, still not looking up from his drink.

"Yeah, I bet," Rono ridiculed him, letting out a disbelieving chuckle. "I can hear your gut growling from here. You'd give both your balls for a hot meal and a pack of cigarettes. Play it smart, man!"

"Go to hell!"

"Ah, come on, Jesse. Give yourself a break. Nobody's going to put you down for dropping your jeans. And nobody's going to pin a medal on you, either, for trying to be so straight. Just stand around one of them bars, and you'll get picked up."

"Knock off that shit, Rono. You 'bout to make me puke."

Rono gave him a sarcastic stare.

"You'd let a woman pick you up for money,



and don't come up with some smart-ass shit that you wouldn't."

At that, Jesse turned and looked at him.

"There's a hell of a lot of difference in going with a woman and . . . and this other rotten shit."

"It ain't no difference," Rono cried back in defense, his black eyes snapping. "You're selling your tail in either case. Sex in exchange for money."

"Well, maybe so," Jesse said, weary of this vein of conversation. "But I'd damn sight rather make it with a woman than with one of your . . . your kind of friends."

"Well, I see I'm not getting anywhere with you," Rono cried, angered by Jesse's putting him down. "I just hate to see you looking like a corpse, that's all. If you want to fall dead in the streets from starvation and let the state bury you, then that's your crummy business." He got up to leave. "Me, man, I'm shag-assing it to where the cabbage is."

"Don't slam the door on your way out," Jesse said, and with acid in his voice. He did not even look up, but kept staring at his drink.

"See you round," Rono replied, giving a slight wave.

Jesse nodded. He did not have the heart nor the inclination to say good-bye, so long, farewell, or any of those pretty little words associated with passing greetings. He just wanted to sit and mope, feel sorry for himself, he guessed, think about his past. This was a habit of his since his wife had quit him . . . to sit while he was sober, or sometimes when headed for a drunk, and take out all his precious memories of her, like a picture album, and thumb through them one by

one, reliving them once more, dreaming that they might chance to happen again in reality.

We'll never make it again, ever, he thought to himself, as he half-heartedly watched a couple dancing in the little nook screened off for that purpose behind the blatting jukebox, their close bodies only silhouettes against the scarlet wall lamp which furnished the dance floor with its only illumination. He and Jackie were through. And as he thought this, with everything else in the world drowned out but these imagined realities, it sounded so final, so hollow, so fateful. And a jabbing pain stabbed itself through and into his tortured heart.

No! He would never be through with her, not really, though she wanted none of him. He would go on loving her, caring what she did, who she was with, worrying over her happiness or unhappiness . . . silently.

Sadly he ran his eyes over the busily occupied crowd which lined the bar, at Julie doling out drinks to a gang of roustabouts from the municipal docks, their work helmets shining like polished silver under the red lights. Julie was tipsy already, and she was beginning to raise her voice, giving orders to the drunken men as if they were in grammar school class, cursing. Myrtle, the dago was trying to assist her, and together they made the perfect female duo, Myrtle a raven haired titan, Julie a soft, pliable blonde.

Through the door which led into the poolroom Jesse could get a glimpse now and then of G-Joe, as he and some ratty-looking slut battled it out over a game, and with them lining the tables like guards were Buck and Kelsey and Sharkey and



Catano and Mazzi and Cabaan and queer looking Albert. He knew them all and the mere sight of their pale, ravished faces, like ghosts in foggy wisps of smoke, made him hate with even more intensity this lounge and everything this life entailed. It was not for him. He should be still at home, with his wife and his son who still could be alive, comfortable, secure, happy; not here rubbing elbows with these punks with whom he had little, if anything in common.

He loathed this life, the insecurity of it, the loneliness and deprivation of it; and it seemed that the more he hated it, the more he became involved in it, that the harder he tried to climb out of its eternal sewer the farther back he slipped, the deeper into all the rotten, frustrating degradation.

And it was so easy to keep slipping. Just take a drink, just one drink and he began to slide, going faster and faster until he fouled up again, got into some meaningless fight; ending up in jail, broke.

It was so easy to go down, especially when he was already half way down, and the darkness was so intense he couldn't see the light.

Someday though! Someday!

No use to stay here, he thought with an empty weariness—here glued to this revolting atmosphere. And he gulped down the last remaining drops of his beer. It would be his all for the night. Might as well get up, go to his rat-hole of a room on Government, call it a day. There was no possible way for him to get any money tonight, and he did not believe in miracles. Miracles were for the saints and those who did not need miracles. He got up to go . . .

## *Part I*

It was that same night, that hot August night of 1967 that I first met Jesse Lee Thames in Bruce's Lounge.

I was not accustomed to frequenting bars alone, and I regarded other women who did as a little trashy, and bitchy. Not that I was not cosmopolitan. I was. My profession was that of an artist and interior decorator; it had taught me discretion, and I had my own standards which I added to those of American society, if you can call it a society. I knew how to behave as a lady, and my broken marriage had heaped upon me such an abundance of misery, unhappiness and mental torture that I had learned to "be careful with men."

Too, I dabbled in writing a little, mostly shoddy love stories, of which I was never very proud, wrote articles for some of the leading magazines on decorating, and had completed, after long effort, an outline for a forthcoming novel. So, I considered myself established as a mature female of twenty-five and, being of an independent nature since childhood, I felt I could take care of myself, ready to erect that invisible wall when some attractive man got too close. And there were some attractive ones in this town. Not that I was on the prowl for attractive and available men. I wasn't. But I was normal and healthy, had a nice figure—not by



Marilyn Monroe or Jayne Mansfield standards, but my five feet three inches were well proportioned and everything was where it ought to be, not too much in any one place, but just enough that I could turn the heads of men and drive many girls into jealous rages.

That night, which I shall never forget, I was wearing my favorite color, canary yellow, a simple sheath trimmed in white, yellow high heeled pumps, a yellow patent leather handbag, and a yellow velvet head band which set off my pride and joy, my long flaxen hair. I had always taken especially good care of my hair, a discipline imposed on me by my strict, puritanical mother, and I kept it a little longer than shoulder length, parted it in the middle, clipped bangs which made a nice curve an inch above my emerald eyes, and brushed it daily until the strands had the fine sheen of satin. I was never one to look too tailored, but I liked that clean scrubbed look, the kind you see on Cosmopolitan magazine covers ... wholesome, pert, stylish without resembling a clothes horse or a frilly southern belle. I always pitied girls who tried to look "too feminine," applying bows and lace and enormous flowers as a ruse to cover their awkwardness. And I equally loathed, with the same passion in which I pitied, those women who looked like store window mannikins, frozen, hard, mechanical. I loved life, and my small body responded. When I felt like moving I moved. When I felt like relaxing I relaxed. When I experienced moments of delight I did giddy things. I never drove myself, nor did I ever concern myself with trifles. My failure in marriage

had not hardened me, but it had matured me, and rendered from that calm maturity I at last discovered the secret to living. Play it cool. Or, from my aunt's favorite Bible quotation: "Be moderate in all things." I had learned to be moderate. I was a great success at my vocation, which aided my sense of balance and security; and failure with one man had, to a degree, fortified my heart against any risk with another. I would give less. Therefore I would receive more.

It is better to stay on top with love and never let yourself go under. Once under it is harder to come up again. I would swim in the lake of love in the future but I would never risk deep water. I would take it stroke by stroke. I would see the opposite shore, and I would know that I could swim to the other side. No chance-taking. Never again would I plunge headlong into wild and whirling waters, the opposite bank too foggy for my sense of perception to detect.

I was that careful, and that considered in my emotions.

Until I met Jesse.

As if by the hand of fate, as so many people put it, or by the hand of the god Janus, the keeper of gates and doors, the god with two faces, one dark the other light, one beautiful the other ugly, I turned off Government street that night onto Third street with the casual air of one heading into mid-city to pick up a newspaper. As I turned the corner I happened to notice that the drugstore was still open and the front window displayed an array of porcelain statues. In that fleeting moment I noticed the larger one, which



centered the window, and recognized it as "The rape of the Sabine women." I had quite a collection of statues and Italian glass and I had already considered in my mind's eye how it would look centered on my black marble boomerang coffee table. Instinctively I searched for a parking place and luckily found one, though the car in front of it and the one in the back had left me little or no maneuvering room.

I made several attempts at trying to park my canary yellow Thunderbird convertible, all of them miserable failures. So I pulled it into the curb, jumped out hurriedly in hopes of finding some kind gentleman who would park it for me while I ran into the drugstore for the statue. One of my impulses. I could have waited until the next day for the statue, or the week afterwards, but my whim got the better of me and I stood for a brief moment on the sidewalk and looked for a considerate gentleman. I noticed too that I was standing in front of a lounge, and that behind the car next to mine stood a beautiful motorcycle. It gleamed like a new pistol, its silvery chrome reflecting the overhead neon lights of the lounge, and fleetingly I wondered who might be its owner.

I had always been fascinated by shiny, new vehicles... motorcycles, sport cars, speed boats; and in my artistic praise on this one, I reflected that it resembled, in abstract, a charger in the days of knights and chivalry or perhaps even a sonic vehicle of the far-flung future, its atomic throttles stilled until its helmeted pilot returned to rocket it to the stars. These marvelous contraptions, ignited with super-charges of power, of

thrill, adventure; although fascinating to me, were—secretly—less glamorous to me than their pilots. Men who loved the out of doors, speed; the thrill when death rode beside them in silent silver streams, men rugged as the machines they rode, hard and masculine as the flaming power which sent them through their paces, real he-men, I believed, men of mettle and courage and endurance . . . the kind of man women dared dream about, and hoped to love.

All this I saw and felt in a fleeting glance, a wild moment of exaltation, before my senses were re-directed to reality. I still had to get my car parked and buy that statue. I glanced up and down the street. A young couple came by, eyed me curiously. An old man, staggering, went by in a wreath of whiskey smells, and with a great effort said: "Yep..hi yo, lady." And a teenage boy, alone, wandering, his hands thrust in his tight jeans pockets.

I decided to go into the lounge.

I opened the door reluctantly, peered into the crimson-shot darkness, a little fearful, uneasy now that I had taken the plunge.

Someone let out a wolf whistle.

I started to back out of the place.

"Come on in, lady," a coarse voice invited from the cave of menacing dimness, "we're not going to eat you alive."

"No . . . but I'd like to," croaked another with a thick, drunken tongue.

I was really cautious now, as my curious eyes scanned the bleak interior, seeing the forms of crude men lining the bar, the frivolous-looking girls laden with gaudy make-up, the laborers in



work helmets, younger men in college attire, degenerate looking boys in tight T-shirts and levis, their unruly hair in their fiery eyes, goggling me like they had never seen a female before. Then my gaze fell on a tall, dark man rising from a table where he had been sitting alone. Though I could not make out his features readily, he appeared pleasant enough, imposing to say the least, and I moved slowly into the lounge and to where he stood.

"Were you leaving anyway?" I asked, my voice a little shaky, for I knew that every eye in this lounge was glued to my every move. And it was obvious that only a certain brand of women frequented this bar.

"Yes, ma'am I was," he answered politely, holding firmly to the back of his chair. I seemed to feel his physical presence, a glowing warmth rare even among the few who possessed enormous capacities for passion, and to most people never known in their lifetimes. And this sudden warmth was magnetic, drawing me like invisible threads.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

"I can't park my car," I stammered like a ninny. "Would you be so kind?"

"It'd be my pleasure, lady," he replied like the perfect southern gentleman, and I handed him the keys.

I followed him outside, through the maze of burning eyes, catcalls, whistles, and watched with amazement as he got behind the wheel and parked it neatly in what was a matter of seconds, handling my car as if he had driven it all his life.

"How's that?" he asked, as he climbed out of

the car and returned me my keys, our fingers touching. I noticed his then, how long, how tapering, how firm, and I failed to see or, if I did see, ignored the dirt beneath his nails, the cigarettes' stains, for it was their beautiful contours, the strength beneath the dirt which made the difference.

"Perfect," I exclaimed, and this seemed to please him for he smiled a shy smile, his pale eyes lighting quickly like a young kid after doing a good deed.

We stood looking at each other then, almost hypnotic.

"Is that all, lady?" he asked finally, low of voice, as if reluctant to part.

"Well," I caught myself saying, "I was going to the drugstore to make a purchase. You've been so kind that when I'm through there I'd like to buy you a drink."

"You don't owe me anything for that," he said, his voice breaking off abruptly.

Our eyes met and held, brilliant eye to brilliant eye.

"But I want to," I said directly, independent.

He shrugged again, smiled a friendly, warm smile which won me to him completely.

"Can I tag along to the drugstore with you?"

"Why not?" I laughed, and I paid no attention to the seedy way he was dressed. Somehow it made no difference, though he was in a soiled, disheveled condition compared to my appearance, the clean, wholesome beauty I realized I possessed. I saw, or felt that I saw, something clean and wholesome beneath his rags, a fine body and a fine mind, both keen, animal alert,



the things I admired and looked for in men; and I sensed then that whether he wore ermine robes or the tattered rags of a slave there was that glorious something about him, his warmth, his gentleness, which would shine through, dulling the richness of the robes and turning to gold the drabness of his rags. Too, he was all man, male to his long finger-tips, utterly masculine with every gesture he made, every movement, however slight. He was like a beautiful animal taken into bondage, not quite belonging to these dirty, concrete streets, and I could tell that that search for the wilds was still in him ... his desperation to be set free ... for his movements and gestures were held in check, his manner and speech reined in tightly against the wild tide of his emotions, as if at any given moment he would leap free, and bound away into his dark, primitive alleyways.

"My name is Jesse Lee Thames," he said, introducing himself while we waited for the clerk to pack the enormous white statue into a cardboard box. "What's yours, lady?"

"Lily Maxine," I answered, with an attempt at making it sound as dramatic as I could.

"Sounds like a movie star's name," he said, the light in his lowered eyes deeply curious, flaming with interest, which made me a little nervous.

"Not hardly," I remarked, while I rummaged in my handbag for the proper change. "I'm an artist, and a writer, of sorts."

His eyes lit up even more brightly at that.

"Maybe you can paint me someday, Miss Maxine. Or—or can I call you just Lily?"

"Lily always, Jesse," I replied, and I meant this. I loathed formalities, and I sensed he did too. The natural way was his way, as it was mine.

Like a handy boy scout, he carried my statue for me, put it into the rear of the car, and we went into Bruce's for a drink. The table he had previously occupied was still vacant, so we sat there, our faces and shoulders illuminated by the tiny wall light glowing down from the dark, blood-red wall.

He looked rather uncomfortable when I asked him what he wanted to drink.

"You might as well know the truth right now, Lily. I'm broke," he blurted out, folding his long, muscular arms on the table, shy as a high school boy on a first date. And I didn't, for some unknown reason, want him to be shy, embarrassed. I wanted him to enjoy himself. Why I did not readily know. I had known him for no longer than a half hour at the most, and already I was beginning to develop a genuine feeling for him. He seemed so honest in his shyness, so forthright and considerate, and God knows there were so few of that sort left, that my heart was getting spongy already. He seemed my kind, but I could not point out my reasons for thinking so.

"It doesn't matter if you are broke, Jesse," I said, trying to put him at ease. "I invited you in for a drink, and I want to pay, whether I buy one or fifty."

He tried to smother a grin.

"I'll have a C C and coke then."

I ordered a creme de menthe for myself and the drink he had chosen for himself. We waited



quietly until the girl brought them to our table, a dark haired dago who kept giving him side-long glances he was reluctant to return. I could tell she was ape over him and, though I did not blame her in the least, for some ridiculous reason I wanted to shout to her: "hands off!" Actually, I had no claims on him whatsoever, and maybe she didn't, but I had my bid in anyway, my time was my own, I was free, so, shrugging demurely to myself, I considered: may the best girl win.

"Thanks, Myrtle," he said to her as he carefully placed his drink on a napkin, gave it a couple of stirs.

So that was her name! It fit her perfectly.

Before she returned to the bar she paused deliberately, gave me careful scrutiny, both hands on her hips, the hips of a wash woman, her black eyes snapping like a wild cat's. I returned her gaze until she got cold feet and left.

"That's Myrtle," Jesse explained, after a minute's silence.

"So I gathered," I said, but a little too quickly.

"She works here," he said, as if to explain about himself and her. "I don't know her really. Just see her when she comes in here."

"It doesn't matter, Jesse," I said faintly, pretending a nonchalance I did not feel. "You don't have to explain about her, or anyone you know for that matter."

"Well . . . ah . . . I just didn't want you to think I went with . . . with bar girls."

"Why? Aren't bar girls nice?"

I shouldn't have said that.

He looked up quickly from his drink, which he

had already half consumed, and his eyes were as startled as a hawk's.

"I don't go out with girls . . . not since me and my old lady broke up."

I lifted an eyebrow. So, Jesse and I were in the same boat. I asked him then about his marriage, not mainly to make conversation, but because I had become interested in him, his life, his dreams, his ambitions.

"I was happy with her once," he began, as if he were reciting a school play he had memorized over and over. "We did everything together, me and Jackie. Went dancing, shot pool, loved to go riding in our car. We had a new one then, but I wrecked it one night . . . drunk." He dropped his eyes. "When our boy came we had everything then, a house, furniture, a car, and with his coming we had everything we could ever want. But when he went, nothing was right after that . . . nothing."

"I'm sorry," I murmured, my heart feeling the edge of his loss.

"He was Jackie's whole world. And when he died he took everything with him, even our love for each other, I guess. Things were never the same then, not after our baby. We tried, tried three times in fact, but it wouldn't work out. So, I started drinking, and it just got worse and worse . . . finally." He paused, sucked in his breath. "Finally, she left me."

I saw, felt strongly that it was all coming back to haunt him anew, and I tried vainly to think of something comforting to say.

"It's a pity you didn't try to have another child. Maybe that would have filled up the gap."



"Naw," he said hoarsely, shaking his head until his black hair fell in ringlets over his saddened eyes. "Jackie never wanted another one. And I was about as bad. We just felt that another baby wouldn't ever be the same ... the same as the one we lost."

I was at a loss now.

"But many parents have lost their children, Jesse, and have gone on to have other ones. What about the parents of the boys killed in Viet Nam? Their children were grown young men, and that made their death even harder on the parents, for they had loved them all those years, while you had loved yours only a few short months."

"I don't understand how they are bearing it," he said softly, his voice sounding as if it came from the end of the world. "I don't understand how they can go on and live, day after day, knowing they'll never see them again."

"I knew then, understood and felt keenly his great potential for compassion, love. He was richly endowed with it, and the loss of his son was bringing that fine quality out in him, lifting it to the surface of his being, making him all the more noble, wondrous. He was possessed of great heart, affection, and he was not too proud to show these emotions in my presence—to my understanding. And because he was displaying them before me, like lifting a bandage to display a wound, it did not make him less manly in my eyes, but more so. The more masculine the man, the more tender his nature, and this man, really this boy, seated opposite me was the essence of these noble qualities, the personification of the

manly virtues men are so careless to avoid these days, rather than to keep them intact, living with them daily, despite others' ridicule and derision. At this moment, though Jesse was to me a total stranger, I felt that through his words about his life, the very sound of his voice, he was taking me by the hand and leading me into his world, into his thought; showing me his beliefs, his very heart. And because of that I was being admitted to my full role as woman because I was given the opportunity to view him from within, instead of from without, as no doubt so many people viewed him. People like that dago Myrtle, and others who frequented this lounge, who regarded him, perhaps, as a friend. And I wondered, as I studied him there in the red twilight—saw the sad glitter in his eyes, as if he did not know whether to laugh or cry, the movements of his soft, pliable lips, his swarthinness and his grave, dark beauty—I wondered if I knew him so much now, knew his feelings, his emotions as he had experienced them so deeply, his great and his little faults, then how much more could I know of him, influenced by his passions, his physical nearness.

I harbored no whims about virginity. I had had sex with my husband naturally and had loved it at times . . . but only at times. He had never provoked in me the feelings this Jesse was arousing. He had never stirred me with his body naked on mine, working out frantically the bold urgings of sex, as the tremor in Jesse's voice stirred me, the haunting way he looked at me, his recklessness, the radiation of his warmth and understanding which could shake me, snatch me



to him with the glint of an eye, a grin ... even a faint whisper. He drew me like Alluri drew the sailors. He folded his kindness and his warmth of nature, his significance as a male, about me like a holy shroud, and I felt both secure and frighteningly vulnerable when in his presence.

As I sat there listening to him talk about his life, living on a farm in Brookhaven, Mississippi, working in the fields, his parents' death when he was twelve, making a living for himself until he was a grown young man, thriving, despite privation and want until he had met and married, relaying little incidents about his son, how he had met his wife and where, their frantic, short courtship, every facet of his existence up until tonight, to the full of his twenty six years, I began to study him physically, to gauge him as a man in comparison to his mental and compassionate capabilities. I began to watch, and with deep fascination, the way the big veins crawled up his sinewy arms, how the smooth, dark skin lay so firmly over the muscle and bone, the power, the ferocity they conveyed by each slight move, the way his broad shoulders loomed in the semi-darkness, the fine hair which showed on his chest where he had carelessly left his shirt unbuttoned, the savagery about his features which, miraculously blended with his spontaneous warmth, the glowing quality of him as a man, and even more as a person.

Why he should arouse in me this errant response, I could not fathom. The men I usually kept company with were elegantly dressed, mannerly to a fault, educated, debonaire, suave; men who could discuss clothes, wines, art, events of

the world, travel, war, politics, music, books. Yet, Jesse seemed to have all these qualifications too or, if he did not have them, it seemed the less important to me that he did not. With other men, though some of them were handsome and well-built, these learned accomplishments seemed essential if they were to hold my interest for long. With Jesse these things were not important; if anything, they were worthless. He could hold my interest with a glance, a grin, the nimble movement of his fingers. And with these interesting maneuvers of his, like a beautiful, strong animal you love to watch, he did not seem to be lacking in worldly knowledge—not that knowledge which can be learned from books, but comes from life—which caused my interest in him to become a molten, stirring thing, almost like triumphant music, a march going on and on in crescendo to its final, momentous end. And I realized that if even he did possess all the learned and socially important qualities, it was not important that he employ them with me.

What he was, himself, the dark nature of him, the animalism of him which made him almost perfect, thrilled and fascinated me. And I found myself not only wanting to know him, but to have him, to belong to him, his life; to fulfill my emptiness with his emptiness, to wash out his loneliness with my own accepted and taken-for-granted loneliness. I had not known I was so desperately lonely until I met him this lovely night. I had forgotten how drab, how utterly sterile and mute my existence had become after my husband, until I saw Jesse smile, until I saw with secret tremors the reckless glitter in his



eyes, the softness of his lips. Now knowing, I did not want to go back to my old world, my old life. I longed to take up a new life with him, to make him happy where his wife had not, to take out of the lonely places and fill them with love ... my love. My own predicament brought sharply to mind Virginia Woolf's "Orlando." Orlando had taken herself into the park at Knole, and had fallen upon the soft surf in an ecstasy of loneliness. Then upon the scene came a valiant captain galloping up on his horse. "Madam," the man had cried, leaping to the ground. "Are you hurt?" "I'm dead, sir!" she had replied. A few minutes later they had become engaged.

This was my life now with Jesse, or so I wished it to be, sitting in the red dimness watching him intently, the hardly-heard music from the noisy jukebox invading his world, my world ... our world! Like the mysterious Orlando, I had been as dead in my old, maddening, hectic world of work, of success ... a world of but little play, little happiness, only bits and glimpses, like flecks of bright flotsam washed up from the ocean beds, a life of order and schedule, of the time clock and the coffee break and the boss' birthday party, a date now and then, reading, studying fashion magazines, of enervating labor on the typewriter, with nothing ever overwhelmingly real, nothing ever of flaming emotion, vibrant, alive.

Now with this handsome stranger I felt alive. I felt alive for the first time in many months. Felt meaningful, as if I belonged. No man had ever made me feel like that! With all their beguiling chattering, their bridling, their sidling,

their proposals, their maneuvers to win me, they were as nothing compared to this man's radiant warmth, and the strange thing about it all was that he wasn't putting out any effort to win me. He was merely being himself and without that usual come-on which a man employs on a first meeting. He had made no flattering remarks to me, had offered no comments as to my physical person, and yet, there was a wayward force about him, about his manner, that held and awed me, and fascinated me completely.

Noticing that he had completely drained his glass, I ordered another round of drinks, ignoring his protests.

"Lily! I can't let a woman buy me drinks. These people in here will take me for a hustler."

I gave him a devil-may-care wink.

"Do you really care what these people in here think?"

He shrugged, gave me an absent gaze.

"I guess I don't. But to me hustler is a naughty word."

I smiled at his use of the word "naughty," as if, I imagined, he were selecting his words carefully to please me, and I felt basically flattered that he considered me at all.

"Hustler is naughty if it is used incorrectly," I tried to explain. "We all hustle, Jesse, one way or another. The worker hustles on his job in order to get ahead. The starlet caters to the director to get meaty parts in a show. In a manner I'm hustling you, enticing you to drink because I am enjoying your company."

This seemed to take him by complete surprise for, when the dago girl, Myrtle, had brought our



eyes, the softness of his lips. Now knowing, I did not want to go back to my old world, my old life. I longed to take up a new life with him, to make him happy where his wife had not, to take out all the lonely places and fill them with love ... my love. My own predicament brought sharply to mind Virginia Woolf's "Orlando." Orlando had taken herself into the park at Knole, and had fallen upon the soft surf in an ecstasy of loneliness. Then upon the scene came a valiant captain galloping up on his horse. "Madam," the man had cried, leaping to the ground. "Are you hurt?" "I'm dead, sir!" she had replied. A few minutes later they had become engaged.

This was my life now with Jesse, or so I wished it to be, sitting in the red dimness watching him intently, the hardly-heard music from the noisy jukebox invading his world, my world ... our world! Like the mysterious Orlando, I had been as dead in my old, maddening, hectic world of work, of success ... a world of but little play, little happiness, only bits and glimpses, like flecks of bright flotsam washed up from the ocean beds, a life of order and schedule, of the time clock and the coffee break and the boss' birthday party, a date now and then, reading, studying fashion magazines, of enervating labor on the typewriter, with nothing ever overwhelmingly real, nothing ever of flaming emotion, vibrant, alive.

Now with this handsome stranger I felt alive.

I felt alive for the first time in many months. Felt meaningful, as if I belonged. No man had ever made me feel like that! With all their beguiling chattering, their bridling, their sidling,

their proposals, their maneuvers to win me, they were as nothing compared to this man's radiant warmth, and the strange thing about it all was that he wasn't putting out any effort to win me. He was merely being himself and without that usual come-on which a man employs on a first meeting. He had made no flattering remarks to me, had offered no comments as to my physical person, and yet, there was a wayward force about him, about his manner, that held and awed me, and fascinated me completely.

Noticing that he had completely drained his glass, I ordered another round of drinks, ignoring his protests.

"Lily! I can't let a woman buy me drinks. These people in here will take me for a hustler."

I gave him a devil-may-care wink.

"Do you really care what these people in here think?"

He shrugged, gave me an absent gaze.

"I guess I don't. But to me hustler is a naughty word."

I smiled at his use of the word "naughty," as if, I imagined, he were selecting his words carefully to please me, and I felt basically flattered that he considered me at all.

"Hustler is naughty if it is used incorrectly," I tried to explain. "We all hustle, Jesse, one way or another. The worker hustles on his job in order to get ahead. The starlet caters to the director to get meaty parts in a show. In a manner I'm hustling you, enticing you to drink because I am enjoying your company."

This seemed to take him by complete surprise for, when the dago girl, Myrtle, had brought our



drinks and left, he turned to me with an attractive glint in his eyes, his ready smile so broad, his dimples displayed themselves alluringly.

"You . . . *you* . . . enjoying *my* company!"

"I find you most interesting," I said, and I meant this profoundly.

"I'm not much to talk to," he said, stirring his drink, and for the first time I noticed that the knuckles on his right hand were skinned badly but the sight did not alarm me. Many men had nicked hands through the course of hard manual labor. "I don't keep the company of women much, Lily, not since Jackie. Oh, I talk to a lot of them, like that Myrtle, but that's all it is—talk. Every time I think I'm getting interested I start thinking of my wife, then I lose all interest in them . . . in everything."

"Are you interested in me?" I blurted out, then on second thought added. "Or is that a fair question."

He smiled in a way that was maddening.

"I think it's a fair question." He thought for a moment. "You certainly are a fine-looking woman, and you're smart, got a head on your shoulders. Not like these girls. I enjoy talking to you."

I knew instinctively that he was speaking the truth. You can feel these things in a man by a woman's intuition, so to speak. A liar lets you know he thinks you're a fool for believing him, but a man who tells the truth does not have to take that into consideration. Jesse was merely being frank. I couldn't expect more. Later when . . . or if . . . I got to know him better, if I could make him care for me, then I would

expect more. That is a female's privilege. But now, this night, even though my ambitious brain was ticking, calculating, making delightful plans, I could expect no more from him than from anyone else I had known but a few happy hours. I realized the while that I was too aggressive for a woman. But my husband had taught me that. He had imposed on me the worry and responsibility of managing our marriage and then had later accused me because it had failed. But I knew, and had always known, what I wanted, especially in people. And I wanted Jesse!

I wanted him without the usual reasons a woman wants a man: marriage, security, a home, children, respect. None of these things were important to me now. They never had been. I wanted love for the sake of love, to bask in it for its thrill, the wonderful meaning it held for me and the man who made love to me. So through this want, if not admitted to anyone else other than to myself, I posed an all-important question:

"Jesse," I said, not knowing actually where and how to begin, "I hope you don't regard me as being nosy, prying into your affairs. But since you do interest me a great deal . . . what about your livelihood? I mean, how do you make a living . . . money to pay for your drinks, things like that? You must have some visible means of support."

He was not offended in any way by my questions. He answered me readily.

"Well, I do construction work, been down at Donaldsonville for awhile, until the work played out. Am a pipe fitter too, and I have done sheet



welding."

"But I mean now, presently?"

He shrugged, a habit of his, studied the bubbles on his drink.

"Just loafing, Lily, to tell you the truth. No use pretending I'm working at a job when I'm not. It's not that I'm lazy, actually." He held out one hand, used it dramatically to help express himself. "I know you don't understand, not a girl like you. You don't know the kind of life I lead, the things I do, the rut I'm in."

"Maybe I do," I reassured him, taking out my cigarettes and offering him one. I noticed that he took it almost greedily, as if it were oxygen to his lungs. "I've been around a little. And I've read a lot."

He laughed, and his quick merriment made him all the more fascinating to me, for it was a spontaneous laugh, filled to the brim with the emotions he felt, and not merely surface emotion.

"You can't find my life in any books, Lily. They don't write them that rough."

"You think not? I've read some rather 'rough' ones as you call it. Who knows, I may write your life story someday?"

This pleased him immensely.

"You're kidding, Lily."

"No I'm not. That is," and I played my trump card, "that is if I get to know you better, find out about the side to your life I don't know—the things you do, the way you feel about things. You strike me as a colorful character, the hero type, the ready-made hero, not the stereotyped variety of so many novels about the South."

"I'm dull as mud, Lily," he grunted, flipping the ashes off his cigarette and returning it to his lips ... soft, warm lips I imagined, which curved over the roundness of the cigarette. Smoke curled upward to frame his dark face in a cloud of pale blue. "I pick up a dollar here and there. Have a few friends who fork out a hot meal now and then. It's a lazy, shiftless kind of life, one you've never known, I'm certain. I just do what comes along at the time, a cup of coffee in the morning, a game or two of pool, if I'm lucky, go to the wrestling matches, once in awhile to a show, if its loaded with girls, like them Flint movies, a beer now and then, then when I get fed up loafing I go to work for a week or two." He whirled round to eye me steadily, seriously, as if fearful of how I would take what he was about to say. "Then I blow it all on booze out at one of them clip joints in Port Allen."

"No responsibility?" I cried, urging him on.

"It's not that, Lily. You don't understand. I could be responsible once, honest. When a guy loses everything, his wife, his baby he can't help but flip. I'll pull out someday. You just watch me, Lily."

"Hope I'm around to find out," I said truthfully.

"Ah, you wouldn't want to do that, Lily. You'd be bored to death. Why would a purty girl like you want to follow around with a bum like me?"

"You're not a bum, Jesse."

"Sometimes I think I'm one."

"You've just had a few hard knocks all at once. But I see a lot of good in you, the way you



“speak about your wife, your baby. There must be an awful lot of good in a man who could love a child so. Just because you’re not so well-dressed as you should be, or could be, is no indication that you’re a tramp. I see fine things beneath those clothes, Jesse, a fine, healthy body. And you do keep strong and healthy amazingly for the kind of life you lead, no proper diet, rarely three good meals a day. You’re a good man, Jesse, and I feel this.”

“Good,” he grunted, bowing his head so low that his face seemed covered by his dangling curls of black hair. “You don’t really know me, Lily. How could you, just meeting me tonight? I get into fights all the time. Just look at me.” He lifted his shades, revealing dark bruises, cuts around and about his eyes. “I don’t heal up in one place before another place has gotten it.”

“You must heal beautifully then,” I said, “which is an indication of your powerful, good health.”

“I’m part Indian,” he declared with enormous pride. “We just heal quick somehow. But who cares? Nobody gives a damn—I mean damn—whether I heal or not.”

I gazed at him with serious intent. I longed to be close to him, to belong near him but I was reluctant somehow.

“People care, Jesse, probably more than you think. It’s just that everything, everyone, is in such a big hurry these days. No one stops long enough to analyze himself or appreciate the fine qualities in others. Everything is taken for granted, and I never *did* like that. I *like* to care about things, about people, and I like to tell

them I like them. There is no use keeping it a secret. I think by their knowing, in turn they will like me more."

"I'm that way too," he said, his eyes filled with gaiety. "My sisters say I have a heart, and that's why they love me so much. They know I am honest inside, true."

I loved this about him then, and as we sat there, bathed in the dim scarlet of the wall lamp, immune to the raffish clientele in this seedy lounge, as if we two had floated free of all mortal connection, I could not drag my eyes from him. I realized this was a peculiar and a newly-discovered fixation within myself. The jukebox was adrift too, well into "By The Time I Get To Phoenix," and its sad, haunting, almost ghostly wraith of what my own life had been. It laved the dimness with sound, which rolled over us like an enormous wave. We sat silently and listened; he intently, his every sense keyed to the melancholy sounds, as he drew lazily on his cigarette . . . and how interestingly he could do this . . . the current of the music drawing us into its singular possession like a spell from which we could not stir. When it was over and the rush of silence struck us with sharp contrast, he lifted his cigarette to his lips very slowly, curling it between his long, naked fingers . . . fingers I thought would look so beautiful adorned with golden rings, and took one long, lazy draw, then snuffed it out in the grimy ashtray.

"I'm in about the same fix as that guy," he said in a sad voice, motioning with a tilt of his head toward the jukebox. "Lost my woman."

That one phrase grabbed at my heart with



painful constriction. I was already jealous of "that woman" though I had not one iota of right. But something in me burned for him, crazily, a haunting wanting, a desire I could not shake off, even though I had met him only this night. It was not a case of love at first sight. I was too optimistic for that. It was something much deeper, almost as absolute as death.

"Everytime I hear that song," he went on dreamily, "I want to bawl like a kid. I don't know why, but I just can't help it." He glanced up at me then, smiled that wayward smile that made me tremble to my pixie toes, his eyes glinting tiny lights of silver behind their fans of long black lashes. "But you wouldn't know about tears or unhappiness, would you, Lily?"

"You want to bet?" I asked directly, my voice firm. "I'm the victim of a broken marriage too, Jesse."

"That's hard to believe," he said, his eyes curious on mine.

"Why do you say its so hard to believe?"

"A girl like you." His eyes glittered even more then, and bored recklessly into mine ... deep with searching, longing. "You're the kind of girl, Lily, who will always be happy. I bet men eat out of your hand. You know how to live, how to make men want you."

My pulse began to beat harder, faster. I longed to ask him if he, too, wanted me as other men did but I did not dare. Women—wise ones—do not ask men that question.

"I know one man who didn't eat out of my hand," I said instead.

"Did he treat you badly? If he did, I'd like to

beat hell—er—heck out of him.”

I became elated at this remark, and felt profoundly that I did belong, that this protective sense he felt for me insured this belief.

Then I said factually: “He didn’t beat me, if that’s what you mean?”

“Just mean then . . . that go-to-hell-mean?”

“No, he wasn’t mean,” I answered, every nerve tingling because he was taking an interest in me, in my own life. “He just wasn’t responsible. My husband was the kind of man, Jesse, who did not care a hoot about money. Nice looking, fairly well-built, dressed well, could be that perfect gentleman, but responsibility? He didn’t know the meaning of the word. He’d as soon spend his payday in a bar and not have a red cent left on Monday morning as he would splurge on an extra, pound box of candy for me. He just didn’t care. He didn’t care if we had groceries or not, if the apartment rent was paid or not, the car notes, cleaning bills, what have you . . . nothing. He was a wonderful guy to go out on the town with, treated me like I was queen of the May, but for a husband . . . he was *lousy*.”

“Sounds a lot like me,” Jesse said, and he looked at me from the top of his eyes. “I ain’t no good, Lily.”

Looking at him, I thought different.

“You are good, Jesse, because you have a heart, which my husband didn’t. There wasn’t an ounce of love in him, not just for me, but for anyone. Oh . . . I suppose he cared as much for me as he did anyone. But he just didn’t care about people . . . except how he could use them



and get everything he could out of them. He was such a poor lover." I gave him a fixed, eager look. "In or out of bed."

This brought an instantaneous smile from his soft, fleshy lips, a smile so broad his dimples sank in an inch, and his teeth glowed in the sifted red light.

"I have never had any trouble or complaints along that line," he said, and without braggadocio.

He didn't have to tell me that. I could read that in him. And I sensed, without shame, what he would be like in bed. I knew fully how he could take a woman, subdue her completely, thrill her, all while he was enjoying himself ... and how he could enjoy it! And he would do this by giving all to the woman, not merely taking, ruthlessly, coldly, deliberately, basely, as so many men take women. I could see and feel this in the animalism of his movements, the slow, languid manner in which he lifted his heavily-veined arms, the exciting movement of his legs, the physical ardour he provoked in the female nerves; the way he could charm her by his tantalizing gaze, making her feel naked, the hot, pulsing aura of his obvious maleness, that maleness lodged in his loins which women dared to dart glances at when they judged he was not aware of their eyes.

"I gather that you've had many women," I made an attempt at conversation, for I expected he expected me to say something in this vein.

"Na," he answered, hanging his head as if I had tapped a shameful subject. "Not since my wife, no one—honest—no one."

This caused me to want him, now, even more desperately. To know that he had not gone to bed with any women since his wife, that he had remained faithful to her, even though she had left him, made him in my eyes and heart all the more the gallant male. Especially when I considered my own husband, in comparison to Jesse, him and his long, nightmare of women. And I knew about this dark, handsome stranger seated so close to me, knew absolutely, that he was a better man by far than ever my husband had been to me, and most assuredly a better man than anything that had ever, or would ever patronize this lounge.

I knew from experience with my husband that it took a powerful man to do without sex, any form of sex, once he had mated, had delighted in that mating. This sort of reserve took courage, endurance, patience, stamina, and a great obstinacy to shrug off temptation . . . especially the temptation of the gaudy women who came into this bar . . . like that blazing eyed Myrtle, or the sassy Julie, and other girls like them who threw themselves at him, and probably many, many more who, like myself, found him sexually attractive and wanted him; longed, as I did, to feel his strong, fierce body against mine, pumping into me the wild ecstasy of my dreams, my wistful and premediated desires, filling my loneliness with his wanton body, his coarseness, his utterly dark and provocative maleness.

For man, instinctively, is not monogamous. Usually, he will stray even when deeply in love. It is a rare male indeed . . . and how well I should know this . . . who will remain faithful to



his mate, especially in a land teeming with sex, when everything, from the selling of pink underwear to selling cars boldly employs both over- and undertones of sex, of fornication. And I knew now, and with such an inward pouring of gladness, that Jesse was this rarity in a time when rarity in the male species is the most precious premium in their masculine world. Most men, as I had known them, were common, all of them bearing upon themselves the unmistakable brand which stamped them all. But here before me, as if from a dream . . . the dream that all women dare to dream sometime during their lives . . . was the rarest of the rare.

Jesse!

And how that very name would come to bewitch me in the wild and glorious . . . haunted and desperate . . . times to follow.

And added to this rarity, I concluded with an enormous outpouring of admiration for him, how doubly difficult it was for this man who lived from the streets. And looking around this variegated lounge, its shabbiness, at the motley girls, twisting their behinds for the benefit of the helmeted dockhands; pawing, nudging them with their voluptuous breasts, their legs exposed by their shimmering mini-skirts, wanton eyes playing recklessly with male eyes burning with desire . . . I applied Jesse's animal body, his hungers to these women, and women he would chance to meet in the future, luring him into sex, and with all his deep and gallant love for his wife, his deep and insatiable hungers for her, refusing them as if they were offering mere bread. No man, and especially a man of such physical potential, could

rebuke such carnal offers ... for the male is always ready ... unless he loved his wife to distraction. And I had a wild notion that, if he could love her so much, could be so loyal, so faithful with his heart and his body, then perhaps ... and this was my wild dream ... perhaps I could in time win him as my own. Not in the usual cruel way in which women employ their guile in winning men of their choice, but to win him through an outpouring of kindness, belief in his motives, sympathy for his present predicament, faith in his future. I would win him like the madonna woman, unselfish; guiding in kindness and wisdom. And with these magic tools I might, if I was lucky, win his heart and his body and his love.

A grand, but unwary ambition for a girl of my reserve, a plot of bold dimension by my strict standards, my correct deportment, but I was a lonely woman, perhaps without confessing that I was lonely until tonight. Now, Jesse made all the difference. He showed me how utterly lonely I was. He was the ignition to the upsurge of my emotions, the fire in my summer's wine, the life in my dread and desolation.

The jukebox was in the mournful throes of "Yesterday" now, and my emotions were keyed to the record. This was a new beginning for me, as I hoped it would be for him. A plan, a reason for things, a plot for my own happiness, even though I had not consulted this handsome, beguiling man to know if he was willing to follow suit. Somehow, so desperate were my needs, my new want for him, I did not consider if he would compromise or not. Nor did I consider the



consequences, the life I would in turn sacrifice for his sake. If I had known, as I know now in this tragic telling, I should still have accepted the challenge.

As I look back on it now in mournful reprise, I realize it was all worth it, his body, the manner in which he made love to me (as no other man has) the ferocity of his physical being, the power of his personality over mine, regardless of all that I endured because of him, the nightmares, the tragedy, the awesome ending.

I know now that I still would have endured the tragedy in order to bask in the glory of the other.

I would have because I am true woman, and this is the acid test of womanhood ... pure, healthy womanhood ... the supreme test of ultimate love: what you are willing to sacrifice for that lover. And I was willing to sacrifice, to give up anything for Jesse ... except him. I could not give him up.

It is men who should know these things, not women. Jesse should have forced into me, through his own waywardness, the feelings I harbored for him. He should have shaken me out of my loneliness, should have brought me to life with his bold lips on mine, his thighs against my thighs, should have awakened me to my ready conclusions, but so far he had done none of these wild and alluring things. He had only played the gentleman, and had done it with such cleverness, such torturing excitement with his tell-tale glances, his incorruptible smiles, his shy boyishness, and all the time, as he had talked, while the sad music had played, while our drinks had

fortified us, he had keyed me, my body, my desires, to be in tune with his special brand of madness, his provocative allure.

He had become a sort of grand and intoxicating tarantella and I was dancing to the wild and fantastic rhythm of it, whirling my own mind out of realism and into his own savage dark world, drunken now on his physical beauty, impaled on the tragic darkness of him staring at me from across the table, hypnotized by the reckless way his shiny black hair fell into his wanton eyes.

Other women may or may not have considered him a tramp, a hustler of the streets, a boy whose lack of scruples had allowed him passage through many dark doors and into many beds. But I had held the magnifying glass of my heart, my mind before him, had seen all those wonderful and beautiful things about him that other women, I hoped, were too thoughtless, too careless to notice.

But I had noticed. I had discovered. And I wanted what I had found.

"Moon River" was pouring its magic gold over the lounge, filling the night world with adventure and intrigue. Bold now from drink, and the intoxication of him, his warm presence, I asked the too-obvious question.

"Jesse, do you have a place to stay, decent, I mean?"

He lifted an eyebrow. Other men I knew would have jumped out of their seats.

"A hole in the wall over on Government," he answered, and a dark gleam in his eyes pictured the place, reflected its grim walls, its drab furnishings, its cold, filthy desolation.



"That you call home?" I questioned, without ridicule. I could never say or do anything to wound his gentleness.

"More like the death cell," he murmured, flickering his eyelids. "Good enough for me, I reckon. I've become nothing but a bum. So I guess I don't deserve better."

I began to choke up. If he refused my invitation to come to my apartment for the night I would faint. For me, this was the crucial moment. If he went with me all would be fine. I knew this, for he was a real man and I was a genuine woman. But if he refused, then this would be my last chance. I would never have the heart nor courage to ask him again.

"Jesse," I began, fumbling for words, hopeful of sounding blase, casual, but knew I could not. Every beat of my heart was coming up through my throat to sound in my throbbing voice.

"Don't think me a brazen bitch, but why don't you come to my place . . . tonight anyway . . . see my paintings, do something different for a change? It'll do you good."

"I'd like that," he replied, his face grim, certain in the red sprays of light. "But won't I embarrass you, Lily? I'm not dressed to go anywhere, you know that."

"You look fine," I said, and with meaning. "But you should get away from all this, if but for a little while. It's depressing you. You need color, cleanliness, a different environment."

"But to *your* apartment," he cried, defiant, as if I was offering him the Hotel Astor. "Wouldn't people think you were a . . . a . . . bringing a man in?"

I tried to laugh a brave laugh at that, but it was a quivering, bitter laugh.

"Well, I don't think the governor will evict me if I invite you," I said in cool protest.

He laughed. And his laughter made me tremble. My knees shook. I was afraid he was going to refuse, and if he refused, in his eyes I would look no better than the girls in this bar, that brazen hussy Myrtle, that tease Julie. He laughed again, and he was so maddeningly attractive when he laughed, a sound you loved to keep on hearing, like a wonderful piece of music you never tire of playing.

"You know I'll go, Lily," he said then, with finality, and I fell back in my chair in relief, though I tried not to be so obvious about my delight in his presence. My legs began to tremble so that I could hardly stand as I attempted to get up. He caught me politely by the arm and assisted me. Then, without delay, he escorted me down the length of the dark bar, as if he were as anxious as I. The jukebox was harping "A Man and a Woman" by Andy Williams as we left, and I considered this appropriate for our departure.

Outside, he pointed to the shiny motorcycle.

"I'll follow behind you. You just lead the way."

I nodded.

Now, instinctively, I linked the two together, saw with what magnificence they fit as one, as if they were made for each other, both hard as steel, dark and gleaming, geared for fire and guts and deathless, flippant darings. Counterparts, the heavy veins in his arms . . . and in his legs too I



was positive ... blending with the glistening wires which ran from battery to ignition to engine, both with a skeleton of iron, both ferocious, strutted with muscles of fibre and chrome, both shiny as a sculptured statue waiting for the gods to breathe into them the nebulous fumes of life.

I saw then and there that the man was perfect for the machine, as the machine was perfect for the man. Both the ultimate in creative design, flawless, as the man must be to survive this glorious shining vehicle; as the vehicle must be to function, perfectly for the man. Together, they formed a phenomenon unequalled, as dreamy as an illusion you think you actually see but don't, a thing you may read about in poetry once, see in a work of art, hear in beautiful music.

Here was brawn and muscle and steel interlocked. And I beheld this fact with avid clarity as he lifted one powerful leg, straddled it, and stepped down hard on the pedal which awakened it in a roaring crescendo. They fit, like a knight in silvery armor on a black stallion, like a naked warrior on a pinto pony, like a matador and a raging bull. And how was I to know, or even dream of such an awesome ending, as I stood there under the bright neon lights admiring the two together, that both of them in the immediate future would be smeared with mud and blood, and would scream their way through my tortured heart on and on to their tragic ending?

I did not know. Nor was there any one to tell me, not fate, not even God!

My apartment was located at the far end of Lafayette Street, facing the bluff and the Mississippi river. We had but a short distance to go, and I watched him through my rear-view mirror as he trailed me, his powerful, sinewy body swaying as the dazzling machine swayed, and I was thrilled to the marrow of my bones that he was following me . . . ME . . . Lily Maxine . . . who had somehow forgotten how to want a man, to be loved by a man. This dark, roving-eyed Jesse Lee Thames was following me, to make love to me, to give himself to me, his body, his sex hunger, his loneliness.

My apartment sat behind a mortar wall very much like the apartments in the French Quarter in New Orleans, approached by way of a hinged double gate of wrought iron which led into a flagstone courtyard boasting a fountain in the center, a number of banana palms, wisteria vines, and potted plants in enormous oil jars placed around the inner walls. When I had driven my car through the gates and down the long, dark alley and into the open courtyard, I got out and directed him where to park his motorcycle.

"Can it be seen from the streets?" he asked directly, which puzzled me a little.

"Of course not," I replied, still concerned, but smiled a coy smile. "You're in good company. Not ashamed are you?"

He smiled, lifting the cycle as if it were made of cardboard and kicked out the parking prop. "You know I'm not. It's just that I don't want anybody to see it, that's all."

"It's safe," I assured. "Even if it's stolen, we can contact the police. You'll get your cycle



back.”

He gave me a quizzical look.

“I don’t want to call the fuzz ... understand?”

I failed to follow his line of reasoning.

“If it’s stolen, Jesse, that’s the logical thing to do.”

“I don’t want the fuzz,” he implored, and there was a hint of malice in his voice. “You don’t understand, Lily. There are a lot of thugs in this town who would give anything to snatch my motor, and if I call the fuzz it’ll make things worse, that’s all.”

I gave him an understanding look, fumbled for my keys.

“Whatever you say, Jesse.”

I went ahead of him up the stairs, listening with secret, exciting delight and a faint air of recklessness, to the tap tap of his boots on the metal treads. Goose pimples broke out all over me at the thought of this savage male following after me, soon to make love to me, I was certain, How could it be any other way?

When I had unlocked the door and turned on the vari-colored lamps he surveyed the apartment with glee, almost like a child.

“You got a nice pad, Lily,” he said, as I went to my zebra-skin covered bar and mixed two drinks.

I thought my place rather unique too, with the white leather divan and chairs, the Toshiba T.V., the ebony black furnishings, the room highlighted in colors of orange, emerald, and purple, my Kahlua wood carvings, my ivory statues of gods and goddesses, my Incan shield hanging over

the divan, my fur rugs on the black tile floors.

He looked at my paintings which lined the walls as thickly as in an art museum, making light comments about each: a magnolia and Confederate flag, a primitive depicting savage armor, a matador, the young Christ, a male and female nude. Cleopatra life size, a modern Adonis holding a lion on his shoulder, a male and female in futuristic attire, more male nudes in all their glorious detail.

He looked, studied each intently while sipping his drink, but did not elaborate. Of this I was glad. He was at least sincere. He merely said what he thought, and did not, as so many people who do not know even the rudiments of art, take off on some improbable tangent, talking constantly, but saying nothing worthwhile.

When he had finished looking over the living room we toured the bedroom and my enormous bath and dressing niche. Idly, he picked up decanters of cologne, sparkling decanters of perfume, took off their glass caps, sniffed at the armorous Arpege, daubed a little of My Sin behind his ears playfully, laughed excitedly when he opened the vial of Chant D'Aromes, tossing back his dark head until his black hair flew up in wild tangles, squinted at my flask of Stromboli, as I leaned against the door facing and watching, giggling foolishly as he went through them all: Moorea, Barbados, Corfu, Skye, and Majorca, wonderful scents I had collected during my long lonesome reign of nothingness.

"I like smells," he said, as he picked up a bottle from my gold and white dressing table and



placed it to his nose. "Pub, a cologne for me." He gave me a wicked glance. "My, my, Lily, I didn't know you were that kind of girl."

"In case of emergency," I replied, without shame.

"But you're not like that, really, are you?" he asked, deeply serious, and his blazing eyes were serious too.

"I guess I should consider myself lucky then," he said. "The first one since your husband."

"The *very* first, honest."

He smiled his intoxicating smile.

"I like that, Lily."

We returned to the bedroom. I switched on the scarlet lamps on each side of the bed, then selected something for the hi-fi. Maria, from West Side Story. Soft and low, not high-brow nor low down. Returning to the bedroom, I found him standing beside the bed, gazing down at it. His eyes were fixed, wishful, as if he wanted to sprawl in the middle of the black fur spread, heaped with multicolored pillows of velvet and satin. But that he dared not yet, as if some unseen hand forbade him.

"You live like a queen, Lily," he remarked thrusting his hands in his hip pockets. The crimson light caught and held his expression, a glowing profile of beauty, and I thought he resembled one of the warriors from a Cecil B. DeMille movie, perhaps Sampson, lifting the veils for Delilah.

"Not really," I tried to explain, handing him a cigarette from a gold box on the night table. He leaned forward while I fired the lighter and lit it for him. "I just love beautiful things, Jesse."

"I do too, Lily," he said, and his voice was like velvet. "I always have. Jewelry, nice clothes, shiny new cars. And I'll have them again someday, just watch me and find out."

"I know you will, Jesse," I assured him, and for a moment we just stood there above the enormous bed, listening to the music, as if not knowing what to say or do. "It takes a long time to build an accumulation like this," I said at last, very slowly. "Take this apartment. I have collected statues and paintings and glassware for years. It gives me something to do on my days off. That is why they look as nice as they do, so appropriate, for I have all the time in the world to collect them. The mad collection of a lost and lonely heart."

"You couldn't ever be lonely, Lily," he said, looking squarely at me, his eyes reflecting the twin flames of the bed lamps. "You have everything, good looks, a nice pad, a fine car, money, while I . . . while I . . ."

"I didn't always, Jesse," I cried, interrupting him. I knew he was put down by his own personal failures, and I wanted to lift his spirit, to make him feel at home, wanted. "I was born on a one mule farm in Mississippi, Jesse."

"I don't believe you."

"Would you believe I've hoed and picked cotton, ridden in a rickety old truck with my papa to the farmers' market to sell vegetables from our garden?"

He gave me a cocky look.

"Lily, you're putting me on."

"No, Jesse, I'm telling you the truth," I said gravely, going round the bed where I stood



before a round mirror on the wall and stood eyeing my reflection. "I use to help my mother in the kitchen, cooked, sewed, helped papa with the cows, milked, washed clothes at an old spring down in the woods. I guess I matured fast enough, not like most country girls. One day when I was about fifteen I leaned over the well a little farther than was necessary I guess and one of the county boys, Roddy Walker, I think, coming down the lane about that time gave me a wolf whistle. At that moment I grew up. I began to take notice of my good looks. I thought I was a beauty then, because of that whistle, and realized that boys took notice of my figure. I was always healthy, had nice skin." I glanced at my arms in the mirror, my face, my neck. "One day I just couldn't stand the farm and mama and papa any longer, so I ran away from home, headed for Hollywood. Got as far as Houston Texas. After that, I married and acquired a little sense. Took a course in art and interior decorating. I had always liked to fix things up. And I began to write short stories for love magazines. I have been a success in my profession, not bragging, but a failure in everything else."

I paused, turned from the mirror and gazed at him.

"I have the highest regards for your talent, Lily," he said, taking a puff from his cigarette. "And you as a woman."

"I have learned most to be sincere," I said. "At least with myself. What I want is the genuine ... genuine friends, genuine love, genuine faith in the future. I am tired to death of shoddy good times, people who are cheap,

hypocritical, thrills that are not really thrills, just pretended nonsense. I have won my world profession wise, Jesse. What I want now most in life is to meet someone who is honest and clean and says what he believes and believes what he says."

"That leaves me out then," he said, his eyes a little sad.

"What makes you think so?" I asked, leaving the mirror and going to him. "Maybe I see in you all the things I want in a man, what I fail to see in other men, all the things, the qualities my husband failed to have."

He looked down at me then, his eyes dancing in the scarlet light, his lips slightly parted, his dimples showing in the semidarkness of my beautiful room.

"I can't give you anything, Lily. Right now I can't even give myself anything. I'm at rock bottom. Don't you know that?"

"I'm not speaking of material things," I blurted out, intoxicated by his warmth, his physical nearness. "I want to be loved for myself alone, for if I cannot be loved for myself alone, then I had rather not be loved at all."

He lifted his eyes, looked away, his gaze distant, remote.

"I can't even give you love, Lily. For I love someone else."

This was hard to take, with him so near, in my own bedroom, with the red lights dimmed, making the room so pleasant, so inviting, the enormous bed spread softly before us—waiting for our bodies . . . drinks aplenty to inflame our emotions and our minds, music to whirl us out of our



senses.

He did have control. God he had control!

"I realize that," I said finally, gazing up into his far-away eyes, hopeful of luring his attention back to me. "I know you love your wife. I can accept that." Then, recklessly, shamelessly, I put my cards on the table, with the aces up. "Jesse . . . Jesse, your marriage has failed. Mine has failed . . . miserably. We are two lonely people cast upon the world. We are still young. We still have desires. Would it be terrible—so terrible if we came to a compromise. We could be good for each other. I could give you what you want, what you need most now, clothes, money, a car, and you in return can give me what I want, what I need, your presence, your body, your companionship."

"Do you know what you're saying, Lily?"

I looked at him with hard, deliberate eyes, thinking of all my past miseries, my heartaches, my total ruin.

"Yes . . . I know, Jesse."

"Sounds too good to be true," he said, toying with his cigarette, rolling it between his fingers. "But I've never been with . . . with another girl, not since my wife. I don't know. I just don't know."

It sounded so futile now, now that I had put my proposition so bluntly, and I was at a loss on which way to turn, what strategy to employ.

"It's not like I was a common . . ." I began, defiantly.

"Oh, I know that," he interrupted. "I like you, Lily. You're a fine-looking girl. Any man would jump at the chance. It's just that . . .

that ..."

"That your wife wouldn't approve," I finished for him.

"She don't give a damn, not really."

"Then, what's to stop us from being together, enjoying each other?"

His face was sad then in the red glow and his eyes in the intense, tragic light were the saddest I was ever to see.

"It's just that ... that I still love Jackie, and just the very thought of going to bed with another girl kinda gives me the jitters—some kind of guilty feeling I can't explain. I feel like I'm hurting her, deep down, and all for pleasure and money. Oh, Lily, I've done many, many rotten things to hurt her, things I'm very much ashamed of, but not this ... not sex."

I moved still closer to him, acting the bitch I reasoned blindly, and in doing so, felt his glowing warmth, the heat of his fine body seeping into mine.

"I understand all that, Jesse," I said, putting in my bid, laying a nervous hand on his heaving chest. "But we could live decently. You do need someone to help you, someone to give you advice, pull you out of the gutter. And you are in the gutter, Jesse, and you'll keep going down, down, down. You need me, Jesse, need me to take you away from all that filthy nightlife, the streets, those degenerate people you've been associating with. I would be good for you and, in time, when you have clothes, money, my car, then maybe you can win her back, be like old times again."

He studied for a brief moment, his eyes lit



with a strange, inner light. Then he gazed down at me, a long, thoughtful look.

"Maybe you can help me, Lily. And God knows, I do need help. But," he shrugged. "I feel like a fool, a tramp, living off a woman. I feel dirty inside."

"I do want to help you, Jesse," I implored, my head lifted to his, my heart in my eyes. "Please . . . please let me be good to you."

He nodded in acceptance. Then he snuffed out his cigarette in the enormous shell ashtray on the night table.

"Do you mind if I shower?"

"It's your home now," I advised happily. "Do anything here that you like."

While he was taking a shower I slipped out of my high heels, my hose, and my dress, leaving only my black lace bra and panties. Then, in elation, I slipped into my bright yellow silk lounging robe with the white fur trim.

When he had completed his shower, he came into the bedroom wearing only a lavender bath towel about his wet loins. I almost went faint at the sight of his smooth, muscular body dripping as if he had stepped from the ocean waves. He was so dark, so golden bronze there in the warm gold of the bed lamps, with his every muscle highlighted with shadow, every vein thrust out vividly, so animal, so savage in this prim, effeminate room, like a wild panther in a silken cage.

He looked so magnificent standing there in his full glory, without the misleading effects of his soiled, torn clothes; wearing the beauty of his masculinity as a king might wear a jeweled

crown ... as I knew he would look ... as I had sensed it so emotionally back in Bruce's Lounge.

There was a fine layer of hair on his chest, not wiry and ape-like which is so repulsive in many men, but silky and fine, and it lay closely along the satin rounds of his chest, a chest so broad it looked like the armour on a Roman centurion, his dark brown nipples showing plainly, protruding from the shadows the lamps made along their hard contours, hard as the marble nipples seen on Greek statues.

My eyes wandered down his body, slowly, daringly, devouring him completely, following the fine, thin line of hair to his navel, where the soft texture of the towel began, then below to his heavily veined legs. I saw that his thighs were round, firm, like melons, Herculean in strength, then to his calves which bulged like hard, round stones. I noticed his feet too, trim of ankle, hard of bone, keen, slim, and parted in a fork at his big and second toes. Devouring him completely in that one desiring gaze, awed, probing him hungrily. I sensed with my every female awareness his savagery, the ferocity within his beautifully formed body which, at any moment I reasoned, might unleash its strength, its vigor, to the overpowering angers and passions of a wild animal.

Yet, so calmly did he stand before me, glowing from his fresh, hot bath, his flesh radiant, warm and fragrant—gleaming like a statue dipped in melted gold.

"Would you dry me off, honey?" he asked and, without a moment's hesitation nor embarrassment, he unknotted the towel from his



loins and handed it to me, standing completely naked in the middle of the room.

I took the towel in trembling hands as my eyes automatically slipped down his body. I shook in every tendon of my limbs, my whole body, my heart pounding until it seemed I could hear it in the depths of my breasts, as I dared to glimpse but for an instant his maleness, the glory of his naked body which brought to the ultimate in my concepts of him, his stallionhood complete. The darkness there in the nest of curling hair, like a shadowy dream, his powerful, heavily-veined penis swinging like a hose between his silken thighs, vigorous, darkly mysterious, the emblem of his young, splendid manhood.

He was the kind of man women craved in their wildest dreams. The kind of man whose vision haunted them their every waking hour. The kind of man few women find and can hold in a lifetime.

He was sex personified. He was so darkly male he seemed to smell of sex, the ferocity of his forceful personality trapped there in the long, heavy organ until the opulence of his desires awakened it to gore out its ultimate goal.

Jesse! Just as I had dreamed he would be. Just as I knew he would be. Just as any woman, who is a genuine woman, can know about a genuine man.

With trembling, uneasy hands I dried his chest, running the soft towel down his huge forearms, felt their hardness, their strength, and going limp at their feel. Then I dried his chest, slowly, carefully, watching with anxious motion how the hair bristled, as when you stroke a

healthy animal.

"You have a nice physique, Jesse," I blurted out nervously before I realized what I was saying, my voice, my manner twitchy, trembling like a thief caught in the act of stealing, as I kept stealing glances at his robust sex equipment. "God, oh God, but you are a man, a real he-man."

And before I could catch my breath, he moved closer, snatched me close as he swept me into his arms. I felt in a wild flurry his face go over mine, his lips touching my lips, softly at first, then maddeningly. He bent my body back, his strong brown arms going down and around my waist, his lips, molten now, hot, panting, sliding from my lips, down my throat, into the hollow of my breasts.

I let out tiny, agonized cries—cries of ecstasy, my whole body melting under his dark, vigorous strength, his strong grip on me making me go weak. An instant more and he had pulled me to the bed, his long wondrous fingers pulling away my robe and bra. Those fingers slid like oil down my flesh, to my panties, fondled there until I squealed and my body stiffened then pulled their silken nothingness down my willing legs, and with deliberate sureness, the art of sexual sleight-of-hand.

Then, like a dark and glorious dream, he was up between my legs and over me, completely covering my world. And suddenly, as he gored me with his enormous, stiff penis, completely in one slippery, hungered-for thrust, a wild thrill went through me the like of which I had never known. Then, to the opened throttle of his full



power, all tight-wedged into me and cloistered for this purpose, locking in a vise my body to his, as bone and muscle bore on bone and muscle, he worked his mighty organ into mine, our bodies blending like hot wax, his hard, muscular thighs spreading their way against my thighs, his maleness working its enormous way deep into me with the regularity of a piston in warm oil.

Suddenly, as he clung to me frantically, goring and filling me again and again, thrilling us both ... suddenly he was mine.

Jesse, in this wild moment and this madness, was mine, in this dark room, in my own bed, in my arms, giving himself to me completely, fluxing out of his pent-up body, his pent-up drives, all the sexual craving he had kept locked in his throbbing groin since he had lost his wife. He was giving all this to me, giving himself wholly, every muscle, every nerve, his every sexual want, one urge heaped upon another since his wife had denied him her body, her love, the base, carnal pleasures of his appetite.

And he had such an enormous sexual appetite.

His hard, dark arms folded themselves under my body, lifting my buttocks, caressing me maddeningly, their hardness now turned to the softness of velvet. And his heaviness pressing into me, and his massive strength, now turned animal, were tossing the reins of reserve aside, and he became wild and loose and free in his giving, driving his male augur to the hilt, to the very end of me, thrusting his tortured sexual drive all through me, and in wild and flowing rhythms, sharpening my every nerve to their extremities, shuddering into my greedy, pulling

loins thrill upon thrill.

And when he lay still on my weary body at last, panting for breath, our bodies drenched in sweat, he folded me to him warmly, kissed me fondly on the cheek, the eyes, the lips, covering my body, my world with his sexual love . . . the love he had forgotten he had owned, the kind of love I had forgotten I would find again in any man.

We were fulfilling our loneliness and our pent-up longings. We melted into each other, like candles held to a flame, gorging ourselves on the hungers we had withheld, the love and passion we had denied ourselves, the wild and frantic lusts when we thought those lusts cold and dead in the desolation of our tortured, broken hearts.

Now we had each other. Love or not. We had each other.

When he lay asleep in my arms, his face nestled in the hollow of my neck, and I remained awake, listening to his soft, contented breathing, I made a vow to myself.

"God," I murmured beneath my breath, "let me keep him for my very own. Let me keep him like a beautiful statue to look at and adore, to caress like a wild pink rose. Let me keep him always, and I'll ask nothing more."

\* . \*



## *Part II*

Jesse dressed and left before dawn. But two nights later he came back. The door bell rang and when I opened the door with a rush he stood there in the half-darkness, more dishevelled than when I had first met him, his shirt in tatters, a patch over one eye, drenched in the downpour of rain. "Can I come in, Lily?" he asked timidly.

"Sure," I said, opened the door wide as he passed through.

I fixed him a hot meal while he took a hot shower, and when he had eaten, he lay back on the bed naked while I applied tincture of merthiolate to his wounded hands and face.

"What in the world happened?" I asked seriously, wondering how anyone so handsome and cool could get so mangled, so mutilated.

"Them punks jumped me," he said, as if that was a plausible explanation. "I had to come here. They're still looking for me."

"Oh," I said, falling back in disappointment. I had flattered myself that he had come purposely to see me. "Why are they after you?"

"One of them got fresh with my wife, so I laid him on his ass. Pardon me, Lily, I didn't go to say that."

"It's all right," I said lowly, noticing that he did not flinch when I applied the burning merthiolate. "But I thought you were through with your wife?"

"I am," he muttered, sitting up in bed and reaching for a cigarette from the gold box on the night table. "But I don't want no punk pawing her. Do you blame me, Lily?"

I shook my head, for I could not find words for that. But I thought: if he was through with her, why did he still try to protect her from other men, and I assumed momentarily that there had to be more to it than that.

"No punk has a right to play up to my wife," he went on hoarsely, dragging at his cigarette which he kept thrust between his lips, cowboy fashion.

"They have every right," I said, a little bitter. "That is, if you are through with her. If you don't want her, then let someone else have her."

He was silent then, and as unconscious about his nakedness as if he had come from the garden of Eden. But I didn't mind. In fact, I gloried in devouring him with my eyes, admiring his fine body without being so conspicuous about it.

Since he did not try to counter my last remark I added:

"You don't want her, do you, Jesse?"

"I do still love her," he answered, not looking at me. "But Jackie and I can't make it, Lily. We don't even speak."

"And you still fight over her? That seems odd."

"I can't explain it, Lily. I guess I'm jealous of her in a way, like I used to be when we were married. I just can't help it."

I stuck a band-aid to his brow, raised up and looked down at him tiredly, a little annoyed that he kept bringing her into our world, as if she



were a shadow that always stood between us, defying, ridiculing, ominous.

"Jesse, tell me something. Is all this drinking and fighting about your wife really, or—or do you just love to drink and fight for drinking and fighting's sake?"

"Naw, Lily, honest. It's about her. I try to avoid her. When I go to one joint she follows me there. If I get up and leave then she follows me to the next one, from the Candlelight to the Riviera, then to Vic's, then back to the Riviera, trying to catch me with another girl I guess."

"And you don't speak to each other?"

He shrugged.

"Well, she don't speak to me, so I don't speak to her."

"Couldn't you just be friends then? Sit down like grown ups, talk it over? It seems to me that if you loved her once, and she loved you and bore you a son, then at least you could still be close friends. Surely you both can enjoy each other's company, as friends, without loving each other, making love I mean."

He studied for a moment, took his cigarette from his lips and, in doing so, dropped ashes on his naked thigh. He wiped them off carelessly, evasively, leaving a dark stain.

"I guess you're right, Lily."

"I know I'm right, Jesse. Seeing her once in a while, talking things over, taking her to your baby's grave, might be what it will take to stop some of your heavy drinking and useless fighting. You can't go on like this, Jesse, night after night, in nightclub after nightclub, following her around, being the holy knight with sword and

shield. You don't have to play the hero in front of her. No woman, if she loves a man, wants him to fight for her, unless she is insanely proud or egotistical."

"She's none of them things," he said in her defense, even though I suspected he did not understand them. "I'll try to see her, Lily, talk to her. Maybe things will be better."

I looked at him for a kind moment, wanting desperately to help him, but not knowing exactly how.

"I'll buy you some clothes, Jesse," I suggested, after a minute's consideration. "You can borrow my car. Can go see her in style. Make her think you've done well for yourself. How about that?"

He smiled a hearty smile, as eager as a child.

"I'd like that, Lily."

I did shop for new clothes for him, and what a pleasure it was for me to do this. I had always loved to shop, regardless of what it was for, and knew quite a bit about men's clothes, for my husband had always let me do his shopping, saying that I had good taste, one of his rare compliments. Gino Paoli shirts, tropical textured suits—one casket gray the other mauve—Stanley Blacker Corduroys in gray and pale blue, an ash grey suit in tycoon checks, an El Greco in bold, hopsack weave, an English buckskin topcoat, V-neck and mock-turtle sweaters, banlon knits in several colors, Blucher oxfords in shining black, sport coats by McGregor, a skipper blue, a dark maroon, a black, a canary yellow, and a black tapered mod suit by Timely of New York. And a silky Botany. Mod shirts galore by



Jayson, London slacks cut down the the cosmopolitan thirteen inches at the base, Bolero ties, and gads of gaudy cuff-links. I also bought him a starfire ring mounted in beaten gold, a gold wrist watch with an ebony face, and a platinum love ring in jade mosaic.

He was eager to try them on, and went through them like a kid. He tried on clothes almost all one day, and that Friday he begged me to go with him to the Riviera, a nightclub in Port Allen's Goldcoast.

I would have gone to hell with him and back, but to the Goldcoast, I was a bit reluctant. I had heard rumors of the roughhousing that went on in those delapidated honkytonks across the river, the fights, the killings; knew that practically no law existed beyond the river bridge, and hardly a week passed that some murder or rape or knifing or robbery did not make the headlines. But Jesse seemed so anxious to have people see him with me, made such a play over my good looks, the way I would knock them cold, that I consented.

He wore his black, shiny Botany, a white shirt with tiny ringlets of lace down the front, a thin, shoestring toe, ruby cufflinks, and his shiny black slippers.

When he came out of my dressing room, radiant, his black hair curled down over his brow in front, his shiny black suit, smelling of cologne, freshly shaved and bathed, he simply took my breath.

God! He was handsome!

I never realized that clothes could make such a change. I had pictured him in my mind the way he would look dressed properly, but I had

no inkling he would be this attractive. I believe he was the handsomest man I had ever seen, for his savage darkness, his lithe build, his merry, twinkling eyes, the easy, graceful way in which he wore his new clothes, as if he had dressed in fine linen all his life, set him as a person unique. And I think I began to love him at that moment, really love him, from the heart, not the love of his hard dark body, his thrilling sex.

"Well, how do I look?" he asked, as he came out of the dressing room and stood in the center of the bedroom for an inspection. The red bed lamps were on, and their crimson glow reflected along his shiny, immaculate face, his long dark fingers, his glowing shirt, and he became in my eyes a god to me; Paris, perhaps, stepping up from the lower world to take Helen back with him. His black hair shone like silk, and the freshness of his smell, the glitter of his rings, his ready, spontaneous smile, the sparks of quicksilver in his eyes, made of him the reckless, debonair hero in my eyes, the captivating lover the symbol of masculinity, the suave devil-may-care paramour who swept women off their feet, whispered sweet nothings into their ears, kissed them, lured them into bed, and into an orgy of sex, wallowing with them until he had them thrilled, until they in turn became his slave.

"You are the handsomest man in Baton Rouge," I said, and with honesty. I would have liked to see the man who could have compared with him. The perfect escort, the perfect gentleman. And I thought, dared to think, the male Cinderella whom I had magically transformed from rags to riches, from a tramp into a



man of the world, was a man who, later that night, would lie with me naked, my body wrapped in his coiling arms, my thighs around his hard, shuddering thighs.

I let him have the fun of selecting from my wardrobe what he wanted me to wear. Seeing him dressed to perfection now, knowing how proud, how elated I would feel being escorted by him, I felt festive, reckless. He pulled out of my closet a shimmering black, which he said would coincide with his black suit. It was a trapeze, party length, with a ruff of grey fur around the neck and hem. I wore mesh hose and high heeled pumps, patent leather, black, and carried a tiny handbag of translucent beads. For jewelry I wore ice blue irridescent, and I clipped an irridescent brooch at the top of my breasts.

He drove, smelling of Pub cologne, and I sat leaning against the side glass admiring him as he took to the wheel like a cowboy takes to a wild stallion. The music from the radio was soft, beguiling, and the splashes of lights from the numerous cars running over the river bridge gleamed back at us eerily, and the chemical plant at Kaiser Aluminum blazed so brilliantly it looked like a fairy city out of a Walt Disney movie. To the left of us the brightly-lit spire of the capitol building rose into the darkness, and the shimmering river far below, though a little frightening, failed to wrest me from my present holiday mood.

I wanted a good time tonight with Jesse, to live life with him to the hilt, and in the back of my mind, selfishly, I wanted to be that beautiful, tantalizing "other woman," for he had told me

earlier that evening that his wife frequented the Riviera club nightly, and he was certain she would be there.

When he parked at last in front of the club and we got out onto the wide expanse of gravel, I sensed already, instinctively, the wild revelry that was going on inside the place. Literally hundreds of cars were parked completely around the building, which was a dilapidated barn, painted with white which had long since been dulled to a moldy grey by the rain and the tropical elements. It was trimmed in red, and boasted a tier of small grimy windows which ran completely down one side.

Couples were making their way over the crunching gravel hurriedly, the music inside blaring so loudly you could hear it a mile, and a number of coarse, drunken boys were milling around outside, some in laughing groups, others in pairs, bottles and beer cans in their hands, shouting greetings, cursing, spitting out obscene language.

He opened the door wide for me, speaking to several wobbling boys we met in a narrow, low-ceilinged hall, passing an oval, well-lit bar crowded with men, and into the main dancing section. Though it was intensely dark inside, tiny colored lights pinpointing the walls on all four sides, hundreds of faces could be picked out clearly, many on the dance floor living it up to the lively "Judy in Disguise," and many seated around the numerous tables on both sides of the dancing area. To the rear a stage stood out above the heads of those seated, on which a small country orchestra sweated from a frenzied



dedication to their musical instruments, their shiny brows visible across the spacious room.

Jesse found us a table about half way center, and when he had seated us, he motioned for a waitress.

"It's jammed tonight, Lily," he said, all pepper and vinegar, ready, it seemed, to get going. He rubbed his hands together eagerly, as if they were cold, his elbows propped on the table, and he eyed the motley dancers as if, by merely watching them, he was being put under a reckless spell, one which he could not break.

When the drinks were brought and we had taken a sip or two, he asked me to dance. Then, I discovered another appealing quality about him. He was a marvelous dancer. Again, "Judy in Disguise," was going strong, and we danced the Madison, without touching. He was like a dream. He had his own style, and I marvelled as I watched him, and got as much kick out of studying his body movements as dancing with him. He smiled from beginning to finish. He had a way of placing his hands along his thighs, as if he loved to feel their movement as he danced, and his black hair bounced recklessly, falling into his delightful eyes, which glinted like a small boy's out on a lark.

He was breathtaking. For he danced the way he screwed. He gave all of himself, and made a girl enjoy it, thrilling himself in her joy.

Returning to the table, we sat a couple of selections out, as the band went into "Georgy Girl," "I'm a Believer," "The Race is On," and in the excitement I found that he was holding my hand. I felt that I had won a few points with

him, until he motioned to a girl making her way among the dancers, and then I knew, sadly, why my hand was in his.

"That's my wife," he said, and he said it with such enormous pride that she seemed elevated by it. But as I watched her, curiously at first, then stung by jealousy, an odd sensation came over me.

Even in the mad melee of faceless faces, shadows that were not people it seemed, bodies moving in unison with the maddening music, even then, this girl, Jesse's wife, stood out from all the others at this Riviera club. Holding herself as if a hundred cameras were focused on her, her dark head held high, her long black hair falling like water to her waist, she came past, not far from our table, paused, surveyed the mob, like the huntress Diana might look for animals in a forest, regal, lithe as a sapling, dark-lidded eyes, a ghost quality about her, perhaps because of the way the smoke filled room lay its light on her hair, her features appearing to me almost translucent, as if she might have been an illusion, and not real at all.

"She's beautiful, Jesse," I said to him, not able to take my eyes from her, and I watched intently as she remained, picking out the faces in the crowd, as if she was counting them. Her gaze dragged round to us, she looked for but a moment, then she turned abruptly and made her way out of the club.

"She's seen us," Jesse said, and when she was gone he removed his hand from mine and picked up his drink. In one sure draught he drained its contents, his dark head thrown back, the veins in



his throat standing out like taut cords.

Annoyed that he had held my hand purposely just so that his wife could get a glimpse of us seated close, affectionately, I turned on him.

"You're using me, Jesse," I said. "You only wanted me to come here so that your wife could see you with another girl."

"See how you do me," he chided, pointing an accusing finger at me, and he laughed recklessly. The gesture was so cute coming from him I had to laugh too, and I momentarily forgot my wrath.

Then his expression of merriment waned and something of seriousness took its place.

"Don't mind me too much tonight, Lily," he murmured, taking the fifth of C.C. and mixing himself another drink. "I'm not using you. It's just that Jackie thinks I can't get anyone else just cause I use to run after her all the time. I went all the way to Jackson, Mississippi twice to get her and bring her back, and I can't chase her for the rest of my life, Lily. I've tried to hold onto her, but we just can't get along. We've tried it and it just won't work." He gulped down another drink, and in the darkness of this smoke-filled room his face looked flushed, his hair now falling in enormous ringlets over his brow. I noticed too that perspiration was forming on his forehead, and there was a pinched look about his eyes.

We danced again, this time to "Headaches by the Number," and he held me excitingly close, his powerful arms around my waist, drawing me so snugly against his moving body the buttons on his coat pressed against my breasts, and his

face against my face, so lovingly, so warm, it stole into my emotions and I tried to forget for a moment that he had had too much to drink. He was beginning to dance unsteadily, and one time he leaned so close above me we almost toppled backwards.

"It's hot in here," he said when we had returned to our table, though I did not sense the temperature. He wiped his brow, gazed uneasily about him, as if expecting someone, or something to happen, to erupt—some expected, prerehearsed happening, and I began to feel uneasy. After all, this was my first outing with him, and I did not like the Riviera club particularly, nor any of the joints on the west side of the river.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, appeared the snappy-eyed Myrtle we had known from Bruce's Lounge. She ignored me completely, and sidling directly up to Jesse, her face beaming with a ready, come-on smile, her overly large breasts pressed into his shoulder blade, she asked him for a dance. He agreed, a little wobbly on his feet as he tried to get up, and when he put his arms around her and led her out onto the dance floor she turned and gave me the go-to-hell look. It infuriated me, and I became even more outraged as I sat stiffly and watched them dance. It was a catchy number, "Louie, Louie," and, though the other couples danced the Frug, not touching, he clung to her as if they were glued together. You couldn't have pried them loose with a fingernail file, and his hand roving down to her black mammy behind did little to comfort me either.

I tried to shrug it off in a lady-like manner, attributing his unbecoming manner to his



drinking, but I writhed when that dago bitch raised on tip-toe at the end of the dance and kissed him squarely on the lips. I considered his lips mine, his whole body for that manner, and my policy to every woman was strictly hands off. I had bought and paid for him, and I wanted no trespassing.

When he returned, I tried to act nonchalant, but, even in his inebriation he seemed to notice a difference in my behavior, for almost falling into his chair, his head hung loosely over the table, an inch from mine, he said hoarsely.

"I don't mean no harm, Lily, honest. Just want a good time. I'm going home with you, understand?"

I nodded, smiled, but I failed to understand. He had brought me out and I saw no sound reasoning in why he should make such an obvious show over that dago wench, unless, unless he was trying to make me jealous, as he had tried to make his wife jealous with me. This thought braced me a little, and out of the joy of it I mixed him and me a drink, while he sat and watched musedly, his black hair in tatters, his blue eyes blazing.

"You're my buddy, Lily," he muttered, indistinctly and I almost winced at that. I wanted to be anything but his buddy. I just wasn't the buddy type, especially to any man, and most of all him.

"Let's shake then," I said jokingly, since there was nothing else I could do, thrusting out my hand. Surprisingly he took it in his, gave it a firm grip.

"You're ... you're the most understanding

person I know, Lily. I—I couldn't ever do without you, honest."

I was more than glad to hear this, but noticed with disdain his downing the hatch with another drink as if he was putting out a fire in a wastebasket.

"Fix me up again, baby," he said, shoving the glass to my side of the table. I obliged, not realizing what I was doing, the harm that was later to fulfill itself because of his quick, desperate inebriation.

"You can fix them better than my wife," he mumbled, as his head began to wobble. Then, at the first sounds of the band as it went into the spirited "Dixie" he leaped up, ignoring me completely, as if he sat alone, and stalked through the mob to the dance area. There were a number of whistles and rebel yells, as dancers began to infiltrate the spacious floor, and in the heart-thrilling moment I lost Jesse completely. Frantically, I searched for him amid the bouncing shadows, as rough and reckless men, all of them well on their way to becoming drunk, whirled their feminine partners to the stirring, patriotic sounds ... a tune all southerners love dearly, and become automatically rejuvenated whenever its stirring notes are sounded.

Then, as if something electric snapped through the air, the music stopped, and dancers began to scatter. I rose from my chair, thinking a fire had broken out in the place. Instead I saw Jesse. He was bending over a man he had just knocked down and, as the man tried to rise he hit him again and again in the face, hard, enraged strokes which made dull thuds I could



hear, even from across this enormous room. Beside him stood his wife, her hands to her face, her entire figure suddenly ghostly white, and there was about her the tense, frightened look of agony.

Several bolder men moved in then, rough-looking men from what I could see of them in the diffused light, and grabbing Jesse by both arms, they attempted to drag him from the commotion. The man on the floor, his nose bleeding, his white dress shirt torn, leaped up quickly and disappeared through the churning mob.

Then, as if by some kind of terrible super-human power, of unleashed strength, Jesse tore loose from the two men. Like lightening his arm shot out, his fist a hard knot, and struck one of the men on the jaw. Screams went up among the women, and perhaps I screamed too, I was not certain. My every fiber, my whole being, was keyed to Jesse, his safety, the wild thought that his fine body might be harmed, his dark handsome face beaten, mutilated.

As the man fell back against the other men standing round, their fists clenched, Jesse struck the second one, swinging his arms in a wild, graceful arc, almost the exact gesture of a baseball pitcher. His fist, with a dull impact, landed in the man's face, directly at the bridge of his nose. Blood gushed, stained his shirt front like enormous red flowers. Pandamonium broke loose then, and I truly screamed now, as several tough, ape-like men jumped Jesse. They were all over him in a minute, but surprisingly they were off again as Jesse, swinging both fists in a wide arc, scattered them like ten pins. Then two more

jumped him, and were flung back against the screaming mirage of frightened girls. People were moving everywhere now, dark shadowy shapes against the dim lights, the smoke, like frantic beings out of dreams and nightmare. With their movements, and through them it seemed to me, one of the huge, gigantic men, who attended the bar wedged his way to where Jesse stood. Then from the darkness appeared the flighty Myrtle. They gathered around Jesse, as he stood, his head down like a giant elk lulled during the throes of a battle, his shiny black hair in wild tangles about his face, framing him like moss in the wind, his tie askew, his fashionably cut coat pushed back over his shoulders. The huge man caught him by the elbow, led him to our table.

"You better get him outa here, lady," the man said. "Or there's going to be trouble . . . plenty of trouble. And I don't want it here in my place."

"Thanks, I will," I said nervously, rising from the chair and gathering up my handbag.

"I don't want to go," growled Jesse obstinately, jerking his arm away from the bartender. "I—I couldn't help it. That—that son of a bitch was pawing my wife."

"You'll have to settle it outa here," the bartender said with equal gruffness, as people began to gather around our table, including that tart Myrtle. God, I loathed her!

"Come on, baby," I insisted, taking Jesse by the hand. Obediently he followed, or rather wobbled, his arms hanging loosely at his sides, ape-like as he swayed drunkenly, bumping into people, chairs, tables, as I tried to pick a clear



hear, even from across this enormous room. Beside him stood his wife, her hands to her face, her entire figure suddenly ghostly white, and there was about her the tense, frightened look of agony.

Several bolder men moved in then, rough-looking men from what I could see of them in the diffused light, and grabbing Jesse by both arms, they attempted to drag him from the commotion. The man on the floor, his nose bleeding, his white dress shirt torn, leaped up quickly and disappeared through the churning mob.

Then, as if by some kind of terrible super-human power, of unleashed strength, Jesse tore loose from the two men. Like lightening his arm shot out, his fist a hard knot, and struck one of the men on the jaw. Screams went up among the women, and perhaps I screamed too, I was not certain. My every fiber, my whole being, was keyed to Jesse, his safety, the wild thought that his fine body might be harmed, his dark handsome face beaten, mutilated.

As the man fell back against the other men standing round, their fists clenched, Jesse struck the second one, swinging his arms in a wild, graceful arc, almost the exact gesture of a baseball pitcher. His fist, with a dull impact, landed in the man's face, directly at the bridge of his nose. Blood gushed, stained his shirt front like enormous red flowers. Pandamonium broke loose then, and I truly screamed now, as several tough, ape-like men jumped Jesse. They were all over him in a minute, but surprisingly they were off again as Jesse, swinging both fists in a wide arc, scattered them like ten pins. Then two more

jumped him, and were flung back against the screaming mirage of frightened girls. People were moving everywhere now, dark shadowy shapes against the dim lights, the smoke, like frantic beings out of dreams and nightmare. With their movements, and through them it seemed to me, one of the huge, gigantic men, who attended the bar wedged his way to where Jesse stood. Then from the darkness appeared the flighty Myrtle. They gathered around Jesse, as he stood, his head down like a giant elk lulled during the throes of a battle, his shiny black hair in wild tangles about his face, framing him like moss in the wind, his tie askew, his fashionably cut coat pushed back over his shoulders. The huge man caught him by the elbow, led him to our table.

"You better get him outa here, lady," the man said. "Or there's going to be trouble . . . plenty of trouble. And I don't want it here in my place."

"Thanks, I will," I said nervously, rising from the chair and gathering up my handbag.

"I don't want to go," growled Jesse obstinately, jerking his arm away from the bartender. "I—I couldn't help it. That—that son of a bitch was pawing my wife."

"You'll have to settle it outa here," the bartender said with equal gruffness, as people began to gather around our table, including that tart Myrtle. God, I loathed her!

"Come on, baby," I insisted, taking Jesse by the hand. Obediently he followed, or rather wobbled, his arms hanging loosely at his sides, ape-like as he swayed drunkenly, bumping into people, chairs, tables, as I tried to pick a clear



way.

Once at the bar, turning into the low ceilinged hallway toward the entrance, someone yelled:

"You sure know how to pick them, lady!"

But I didn't pay any attention. I only wanted one thing, frantically to get Jesse out of this disreputable place, and safely into my apartment, before ten or twelve of them closed in on us and beat him into a pulp. At the entrance he jerked away from me, reeled, spun round to face the dance floor again, his eyes blazing, his sweaty face gleaming eerily in the half-darkness. Then, as if he had thought better of the situation, or as if some voice had called him, a voice no one heard but himself, he obediently turned back and followed me out the door which a thoughtful boy was holding open for me.

"I'm sorry, Li—Lily," Jesse muttered, the sound of his voice thick, muffled. "Sorry, Lily."

"It's alright, baby," I assured him, halfway holding him up as we slid our way over the loose gravel to my car.

A couple, a little shaky on their feet, met us in the hot, teeming darkness. The boy recognized Jesse. He gave a ridiculing laugh, or what I thought was ridiculing. He may have been in a joking mood for, when we passed, he turned, cried back in a young, boyish voice:

"You got the lady under control, Jesse?"

"Go to hell!" Jesse yelled back, flinging an arm wildly.

Weaving in and out among the cars, detouring around giggling groups who made undistinguishable blobs in the darkness, I finally found my Thunderbird. It seemed farther away now,

alone and to itself beyond an enormous mud puddle; the numerous cars parked around it when we had first come in, had since left, and I had a difficult time of it getting Jesse around the expanse of mud and water and holding him erect until I could unlock the car door.

Then, as if they loomed up out of the darkness from nowhere, advanced a file of ghastly looking boys about Jesse's and my age. They were all bulky in weight, pot bellied, thick of arm and limb, with black leather jackets emblazoned with badges, chains, stars, and what appeared to be ball caps, or army field caps with the long visors obliterating their features. But they were mean-looking, terrifying as they advanced, their arms spread ape-like, their fists clamped into hard round balls. With eyes starved for violence they completely swarmed around us and the car.

One of them, the largest of the group, grabbed Jesse by the coat collar, spun him round.

"Leave him alone!" I cried faintly, frightened out of my senses hoping to use my female wits to stall them off.

"Stay out of this, lady!" one of them shouted, a pinched-nosed, monkey-faced boy with a crew cut and cold, beady eyes. He slipped a gun from out of his clothes somewhere, jammed it into my side. "Lady, your boyfriend got a gun?"

"Heavens no!" I cried meekly, my knees shaking like water.

"Got a gun in that car?" he growled, as the others crowded closer.

"No! No!" I cried faintly.

He turned then to face the boy who held Jesse.



"He's all yours, Ponto! Get his ass, man!"

The burly man swung wildly, instantaneous. His huge fist struck Jesse in the face, and with such force Jesse stumbled backwards, his head automatically jerking back rigidly by the blow, his hair sailing out in wild, loose strands. The man struck him again. There was a dull thud, like a club striking a sack of cornseed. Jesse again stumbled backwards, his drunkenness handicapping his body with the limp instability of a rag doll.

I all but panicked, in as much pain for Jesse as if those hard, steel-like fists had struck me in the face instead of him. I sensed the worst. I felt frantically that in Jesse's condition—or even sober—he didn't stand a dog's chance against this raving mob. He was badly outnumbered and, with the alcohol in his blood stream the odds were stacked against him. And realizing this, seeing the merciless fists again and again pounding into him, his face, his chest, his lifeless arms, I began to sob, wringing my hands hysterically.

"Please! Please! don't hurt him! Please don't hurt him!"

I tried to move toward him, as the dull thud of bone against flesh filled the night with horror.

"Want what he's getting!" cried the ratty boy who pushed the gun barrel further into my ribs. "You just stay put, or we'll muss that sexy face of yours!"

"But that man's killing him!" I cried out desperately, outraged. "I'm calling the police!" I tried vainly to push my body around the pistol barrel, which had me pressed between it and the

car. I had never had a gun pointed at me before in my life, but I remained cool enough to believe, or think, this punk wouldn't pull the trigger.

At the mention of police a wild revelry sprang up among them.

"Ain't no police in ten mile of here, lady," one of them chuckled.

"I'll scream then," I cried out desperately, sobbing still at the sight of Jesse being mauled, my every sense, my every sensation keyed to his agonies as if they were mine. His fine body reeled again and again each time the boy's fist plunged into him, and I felt the pain of that fist, the impact of every blow on blow.

"Go ahead and scream you whory bitch," the boy with the pistol growled, roughing me up a little. "That band's making such a hellava racket inside they couldn't hear if a bomb went off. So scream you fuckin' bitch, scream!"

I kept silent, as every nerve tore like electrical currents throughout my body.

Jesse! Jesse! my soul screamed, as I held my hands over my mouth to keep from going into convulsions.

Then, mercifully, when I thought all else had failed, when I knew, inconsolably, that this was the end of him, he suddenly snapped back to life. As if he had been plugged into a live-wire circuit he backed back several steps, his feet wide apart, his lithe body lifting itself up to his normal height, his hard fists instinctively balled. Like an enraged gorilla brought to bay he prepared himself to stand his ground, made of his strong body a rampart through which they could not penetrate.



"If you want some of me, get me," he shouted at them, pivoting this way and that, as they began to tighten the circle around him.

"We gonna kill you, you hustling mother-fucker," one of them shouted. "Wanta fuck every bitch you see. We'll show you! We'll show you!"

I suddenly went sick at this accusation.

Another roared as if the world was hard of hearing.

"Think you're hot shit on that motor, don't you! We'll show you, you fucker! We gonna ground you!"

"Like I said," Jesse struck back at them with fiery words, his voice now clear, resonant, his body suddenly sober, his every nerve keyed to gorgeous pitch. "If you want a piece of my ass, come and get it. I'm waiting for you!"

One of the boys lunged. Jesse's hard fist shot out like a cobra striking its prey. The boy reeled backwards into the mud. He tried to get up, but kept sliding back and forth in the slime until he was soaked. Another one, prancing back and forth like a dancer, his hands going up and down with the regularity of clockwork, hopeful of finding an opening to Jesse's body left unguarded. He seized his opportunity, shot out a wild left, missed. Like a flash of light Jesse struck him squarely between the eyes. Before the boy could recover his senses another fist landed against his left ear. He lost his balance, one leg pinned under him as he sat down in the mud abruptly. Two rushed him then, as I stood watching, paralyzed. A great surge of admiration rose up within me for Jesse. Drunk or not, he

was a fighter. And I gloried in watching him becoming the master of his body, controlling his every move, making of himself a fortress, a battering ram which attacked like a ferocious animal defending his own life. His arms shot out like a machine, withdrew, repeated the same action again, as the punks caught his fists bluntly, staggered back, moved in for more. Jesse became a wild demon then, as one after the other rushed him, pivoted in for a blow, which he took in steady stride, returning a fiercer one, wild and desperate and sadistic, aiming his fists where they would hurt the most, do the most damage.

Blood began to stream down their faces, jackets were ripped, medals and chains came loose, fell into the mud, trampled, shouts rang out, muffled with the hollow impact of a steel fist in their guts, moans poured out from the circle of madness like ill omens, and cursing and growls and hysterical cries rented the night air, sliced it with horror as they all became animals before my tear-filled eyes.

They moved in on him at last, as he began to show signs of weariness, strain, his breath coming in gushing streams, jerks, as his fine new coat was being stripped from his body, as his white shirt became blood soaked rags, his sweaty flesh shining through the stained tatters.

They're going to really kill him, I thought maddeningly for the hundredth time as I saw him go down beneath an entanglement of arms and legs flinging, kicking, pounding. Fists rained down on him as he lay then curled protectively in the soft mud, his hands brought defensively to



his face where mud caked boots sank hard metal heels into his cheeks, his nose, his neck, against his fine tapering fingers, fingers that had stolen over my body so lovingly.

"God damn you! God damn you!" bellowed the one who had attacked him first, his guttural voice ringing through the wild darkness, as he slammed his fists and boots into him. "I'm gonna kill you! I'm gonna kill you!"

"Stop! Stop!" I screamed, as I watched them bending over, pulverizing him as he sank further into the slime. His face was filled with blood, his hair soaked, plastered against his face, his ears, and he began to agonize, his entire body shuddering from pain and shock. As if his nerve centers were being drawn inward, he lay in the mud as if in a cramp, his knees drawn up to his chin, his blood soaked arms coiled defensively around his bleeding face, his dishevelled hair.

"Shut that fuckin' gal's trap somehow!" shouted one of the punks, as he suddenly turned where he straddled Jesse's body. "If you have to knock the piss outa her with that pistol."

I fell back against the car, too frightened to move. Jesse was dead. I knew crazily that he was dead. No one could endure such a ruthless onslaught. And he had fought so bravely. Such a fighter to go down unsung. A living machine. A flesh and blood weapon.

It was the end, as I covered my eyes with my hands, as the sounds of fists and boots against his quivering flesh screamed through my ears, tore through every fibre of my being.

Then, from somewhere, from out of nowhere, a siren began to make its sound known, and the

thugs began to run suddenly, like birds that scatter when a stone is thrown. They darted in and out among the cars, disappeared into the darkness.

The siren belonged to an ambulance, and it sped down highway 190, turned off on a side street, vanished into the night. I ran to where Jesse lay sprawled in mud and blood.

"Jesse!" I cried excitedly, kneeling down beside him. I caught hold of his arm, tried to pull him up.

"Let go!" he yelled feebly, bitterly, jerking his hand back. I stood up, ankle deep in the slush and gravel, my pumps ruined.

"It's me, Jesse. It's Lily. I want to get you into the car, to my apartment, before . . . before those boys come back."

"Let them come," he bellowed, wobbling back and forth in the mud, his fine clothes completely ruined. "I'll beat hell out of them, Lily. Take them all on."

"You're in no condition to fight now," I said, bending down to him once more. "I've got to get you home." Frantically, I looked around, hopeful of finding someone who could help me. I took hold of him and tried to drag him towards the car.

"Get out! Leave!" he flung back, his voice muffled, eerie. "Don't want you to see me this way . . . Lily."

A boy with blonde curly hair came up and, without saying a word helped me get Jesse through the mud and into the back seat of the car.

"Thanks," I murmured, out of breath, as I got



in behind the wheel.

He smiled, held the door for me.

"Always glad to help out a pretty lady." He slammed the car door.

I was off in a wild, unreasoning flash, speeding down 190 and over the bridge and into Baton Rouge. All that way he kept kicking at the back glass with his muddy feet, moaned, called Jackie repeatedly, and names I had not heard him mentioning before: Rono, G-John, and a name that sounded like Keith.

At the apartment he came to a little, but I had a terrible time getting him up the long flight of metal steps and through the paneled door. He clung to me like a limp doll, smearing my dress with mud and blood, his drunken face against mine. Finally, as I kept up with his staggering, clinging to him desperately, we made it to the bed where he sprawled, a muddy, drunken heap on my elaborate black fur and satin pillows.

We were both in bad shape, as I glanced wearily at him, my breasts heaving from almost having to carry him up the narrow steps, out of breath, then at my dress, my stockings, my hair smeared with blood, mixed darkly with mud.

Slipping out of my soiled things, I drew warm water and bathed his face, his hands, and tried to take off his clothes, but he was so limp, so weighty, I couldn't budge him.

God! what a mess I've gotten myself into, I murmured to myself, praying a little, as I doctored his wounds. A deep jagged cut swelled above his right eye, almost directly on top of the old cut he had when I first met him. Both eyes were blackened, his ears and the skin about

them were cut with long red gashes, and around his lower jaw and chin a number of bruises and cuts marred his good looks, completely disfiguring his features. His hair was matted with blood, and a number of deep cuts criss-crossed along his hair line and on the dome of his brow. His lips too were beginning to swell, and his teeth were a mass of thick, purplish blood.

As I wiped away the filth on his face, stroked back his hair, he began to sob, the streams of tears running down each side of his face and onto the pillow.

"Lily ... Lily, I didn't mean to ..." he cried, his voice thick, choked. He pulled me to him, burying my face in the hollow of his neck, and all was forgiven. He stroked my hair with trembling, blood caked hands, kissed me fondly, his breath rancid from the foul odor of the whiskey burning out his insides.

"I just want you to get well, Jesse," I murmured. "And not to ever go to that dreadful place again."

"I won't ever, Lily," he said gravely. "I promise."

I didn't sleep a wink that night, for he tossed and turned, moaned in his agony I knew he felt, cried out names, curse words, broken sentences I tried to piece together, to make heads and tails of but I couldn't. He thrashed about wildly, flung his hands out, striking the bed, my own body, kicked, pawed, pulled himself up into a ball, unwound, shaking the whole bed with such force I was fearful of it falling in.

The next morning his face was a swollen, purple puff. His eyes had completely closed,



glued to the lids with blood and matter, and his complexion had the pallor of death. Stripping off his clothes, I gave him a hot soapy bath, placed ice bags on his eyes until the swelling went down and he could open them, and doctored all his other cuts and bruises with merthiolate.

His teeth had been loosened by the boot heels of those degenerate punks, and he could eat nothing but soups, broths and milk.

"I'm going to get back at them, Lily," he cried defensively again and again that following week as his wounds healed, and I kept repeating: "Leave them alone, please. Haven't they done enough to you already?"

As he convalesced, and marvelously too, much to my surprise and delight, for I was deeply concerned that his male beauty would be destroyed, I began to notice a bitterness in him I had not observed before; almost malice, when he had been so kind, so considerate, so warm and filled with passion. He sank into long silences, saying absolutely nothing to me, even when I spoke to him, asked him a number of questions, just lay there on the bed smoking, the little round bubble of glass and gold I had bought him resting on his naked stomach, watching with bloodshot eyes anything, however bad, that happened to be on T.V. Something gnawed beneath the surface of his being, something deeper than his wife, the death of his son, the ferocious punks who had tried to beat him up. He seemed in another world, one which he kept to himself alone, and would not even allow my intrusion within it, not even for a moment. Always on edge, he began to snap me up, gave me orders,

kept me constantly busy doing a myriad of trivial things for him, lighting his cigarettes, emptying the little bubble when it was full (which was hourly) bringing him ice water, cold drinks, fussing over the quilts at night, tucking in his feet, examining his cuts and bruises a hundred times a day, shaving, bathing him.

Though I loved doing small things for him, he seemed not to appreciate them in the least, and regarded me as a nurse, or a house keeper to do his bidding, to run when he gave a command, to give my undivided attention to his health and well-being.

But during his convalescence, although he spoke sharply to me, kept me busy both day and night, never showed me the slightest affection, it was during that time—a time without hour or day—that I really fell in love with him. At night, during the long dark hours of his recovery, he would get chills, high fever, and I had to stand watch over him constantly to see that he did not get uncovered and chilled. Then, automatically, he would burn up, flinging the covers aside, his writhing body wet with sweat, his face pale, wan, his eyes imploringly on mine. I had heard before that it was a habit with nurses to fall in love with their patients, and I understood this fully now. It is so easy to love a man when he is flat on his back, and must look to you for his every need, his every desire. I fussed over him constantly, wore out my body and my nerves fighting desperately for him to get well, to be both doctor and nurse for him, because he forbade me to call a doctor. I slept little or any at night, fearful he would go into one of his chills



or that his body temperature would rise dangerously high. I neglected my own health so that his might be regained, never eating enough, never relaxing completely. The apartment went sorely undone, and I neglected my professional work until it began to pile up. My publishers had already called me several times because I had not made my deadlines on my manuscripts, my cover art, and my bylines for back pages. Clients, many old and good ones, became disappointed in me when I failed to show up to re-do their homes, and they began to quit calling after two or three times. The new ones I had made ran the gauntlet with their patience, becoming rude and obnoxious, turning to other decorators in view of my negligence, my daily putting them off.

I was driven, drawn to Jesse's bedside, fulfilling his whims, which were numerous; and when he was able to rise and walk about the apartment he was like a lion in a cage, frantic to get out on the night, to rejoin his comrades under the neon lights, in those caverns and poolhalls and honkytonks which were his life, his habitat.

At first, mostly by my constant insistence, we would venture out together, with him wearing sunglasses to help hide his wounds and scars, taking the convertible and riding to Howell golf course, to the city park lake at L. S. U., to the Baton Rouge country club, to False river where we fished in the remote regions north of Oscar. Sometimes, on warm days, I would pack a lunch, and we would drive over the the Marksville Indian park, to Opelousas to see the antebellum homes, and down west side of the river to

Plaquemine. On several occasions we would take the motor and rough it down to New Orleans and spend the night, touring Pontchartrain beach, city park, the Delgado art museum, and at night into the Vieux Carre.

His interest in such worthwhile, arty things lagged miserably. Though I tried to spark his interest in things other than the streets, nightlife, the shanty honkytonks along the Gold-coast in Port Allen, my offerings were nothing but dead sea fruit for him to chew. He became bored to distraction, and he began to show it verbally, instead of by polite silence. Drinking and dancing and fighting seemed to be the mainsprings of his life, his very existence, and everything else about the world washed over him in an invisible wave.

"You just don't like my company," I remarked to him tiredly late one evening after we had returned to my apartment, having gone to Clinton where they were busy filming "Hurry Sundown." I knew one of the cameramen from a previous movie they had made locally, "Band of Angels," I believe, and had an idea that Jesse would like to try his hand at acting, especially when he had expressed his ambitions along this line, mainly to show off his fine physique, his good looks, I imagined.

"It's not that I don't like you, Lily," he said, giving an ill timed excuse. "But I just want to get out alone sometimes. Can't you understand that? I hate being cooped up here all the time in this rathole (so, it was a rathole now, when once it had been so lovely), never seeing anyone I know, never going to the places I like to go. I



like to get out, be free."

"You're tired of me," I said, and with rightful bitterness. I had been on the paying end, holding the purse-strings, and along with that I was going out in every conceivable way to make him happy, to pull him out of the gutter, to teach him, make something of him, and he was contributing nothing in return.

He slammed his cigarette into the ashtray. It missed, rolled onto the carpet, burning a long brown stain.

"All you want to do is fuck. Hell, Lily, a man likes to do something else once in awhile."

"What?" I cried back, annoyed, my every nerve stung.

"Maybe I'd like to see my wife, take some flowers to my baby's grave. Is that asking too much?"

"No," I replied, letting out the strings of our love, our companionship to the fullest length. "Tell me what you want to do and we'll do it."

He grunted, stared into the dead glass panel of the T.V. set, as if it was on. He got up, went to the living room window, stared down at the river, the docks, the foreign ships moving lazily upstream.

"Not we, me," he said at last, as a hollow emptiness tapped the core of my heart.

I went to the window then, and stared down at the river, thought how lonely it looked there in the sunset light, the haunting bellow of the ship's whistles making me all the more lonely, afraid.

"You can go places alone, Jesse," I agreed finally, giving in to him completely. I wanted

most his happiness and, even though I was not that completely unselfish type, who gave all in exchange for nothing but a love excuse, I was willing to compromise. After all, it was he who needed help, someone to guide him, and not me.

"Can I take the car?" he asked, not looking at me.

"Of course," I answered, thinking the agreement a harmless one.

"Thanks, Lily," he whispered then, his scars now almost gone, his new, good-looking self smiling down at me, and he pointed an accusing finger in mock deviltry. "See how you do me." We both laughed softly, and he kissed me warmly on the side of my lips, as I jokingly complained that it was grandma fashion.

"See you at suppertime," he said, taking the keys and bounding gaily down the steps.

Though I did not worry up until that time, I began to be concerned by nine o'clock. He didn't come in that night at all, nor the next day, nor the next night. I became frantic. I went about the apartment like a wild woman, wringing my hands. I almost went insane. I couldn't keep my mind on my work. I couldn't think. Nothing had the clarity of sanity. My heart raced. Knots formed in the pit of my stomach, rolled so that I almost could feel them. I developed a maddening headache. Sweat popped out on my forehead, under my armpits. My hands got clammy, as pictures made themselves horribly real in my mind, scenes of him lying in bed with another girl, doing to her the tantalizing things he did to me. I went slowly mad. Had he been wrecked? Had he gotten into another fight? Was he in the



hospital? In jail? All these wearisome thoughts pounded against my brain, tormented me, all but drove me to convulsions. And the worst one of all: was he dead? Had those boys found him again drunk, and had they beaten him into unrecognition, dropping his body out on some dark, lonely bayou, as I had read about so often in the daily Advocate? There was always someone's body being discovered, floating in the shallows at False river, at Bayou Pigeon, or over at Lake Maurepas or Lac Des Allemands, not to mention the upper portion along Pontchartrain, along Frenier and Madisonville.

After the fourth day I began to accept the awful idea mightn't ever come back, that I might never see him again. I started once to call the police, inform them about my car, but fell back reluctantly when I realized painfully that I had loaned him the car in good faith. He had not stolen it. In fact, he had never taken the smallest article from my place, unless he had asked for it first. I would have staked my life on it that he wouldn't steal. So where was he then? What was he doing? Who was he with? Was he happy or sad? Was he alive or dead?

I dressed, made a tour of the bars in the downtown section, hoping I might run into someone who might know him, someone who could ease the impatience that wracked my heart, that siphoned on every nerve.

I went first to Bruce's Lounge where I had first met him, careful to wear my best, a canary yellow trapeze, gored in a hundred or more pleats, with yellow feathered trim, yellow pumps and gloves, with an emerald stole.

"Yes, I've seen him, lots," said the bitchy Myrtle when I questioned her about him. "I see him all the time. Lost interest in you, Blondie?"

"Don't call me blondie!" I snapped, being as bitchy as she.

She gave me a hot-eyed look, rather a stare.

"Find him on your own then," she said coldly, her hands on her hips, her black eyes snapping. "I don't have any trouble finding him ..." And she added bitchier than ever. "When I want him."

"I bet that's often," I said, shrugging, as I picked up my handbag and left.

"Try the whorehouse out on one ninety," she shouted to me as I went out the door, bringing on a roar of laughter.

I went white at that remark I know, and my knees shook so that I could hardly walk. Next I tried the Paree, where he and I had danced one night, then the Roman Room, and last the Mirror Room, which I did not like, since I had heard rumors about its clientele from Jesse. "It's for queers," he had said, flipping his wrist playfully.

It was a beautiful bar though, decorated completely in mirrors and glittering, silver drapes. Even the carpet was sprinkled with silver confetti, and the luminous glow of the ceiling lent to its appearance that of a scene out of fairyland, which it was. I went to the bar, a little reluctantly, where a good-looking woman behind its ebony surface was reprimanding a ratty, toothless kid with jet black hair and skin the color of lava.

"I've told you time and time again, Rono.



You can't hustle drinks in this bar. It scares away the customers."

"Okay, okay," the boy cried back. "Don't get hot at me."

I had heard Jesse mention someone by the name of Rono, so when I bought my drink I asked him if he had seen Jesse.

"I saw him the other night, lady," he answered, moving in close to me. "Driving a Thunderbird convertible like a bat out of hell. Is that your car?"

I nodded that it was. "Which direction was he going?" I asked, as if that made any difference.

"Said he was going to Amite," he answered, glancing with hungry eyes at my drink. "You're taking your life in your own hands when you ride with him, especially when he's drunk."

I began to tremble.

"Was he drunk?"

Rono laughed.

"He stays drunk, lady," he said, then his expression dulled, as if afraid to speak more. "Don't tell him I'm telling you this, Lady, but if I was you I wouldn't loan him my car. He's going to get himself and maybe somebody else killed. When he gets to drinking and fighting and has his wife on his mind, there ain't no telling what he'll do. And she stays on his mind half the time. If you want him alive, it would be wise not to let him have the car. He's bad enough on that motor, guns hell out of it, and it's brand new. Reckless as all get out." He shook his head slowly, his expression deeply serious. "Jesse is a purty good ole boy, until he gets to drinking, then you can't do a thing with him."

"I'm trying to talk him out of drinking," I said, feeling a little bit better talking to someone who knew him. "I talk to him by the hour on the way to live, staying sober. He's a wonderful person when he's not drinking, kind, considerate. You couldn't ask for a nicer man to be with."

"Yes I know," Rono said, still shaking his head. "I've talked to him, too, but once he's out of your sight he goes and does just as he pleases."

"Just like all hustlers," said a man who sat next to where Rono was standing, his face sagging like melted wax, his pale blue eyes piercing, stabbing, his delicately-ringed fingers making wide arcs when he talked, his cigarette, thrust into a long, sequined holder, making curling wreaths of blue smoke as it followed his swishing hands. "You can't trust one no more than you can put faith in one of them convicts at Angola. They'll ruin you, lady. I know. Them natty male bitches sure have run me through the mill."

I thought he looked it too and, surprised by what he said, I came swiftly to Jesse's defense. "He's not a hustler, Mister, he's just my boy friend."

He and Rono laughed a disbelieving laugh.

"Not a hustler," the man spat back, turning pale eyes on me, eyes that looked like hot glass in this dark, smoke haunted lounge. "Dear, my poor dear, are you the naive one? He hustled you out of your car, didn't he? And I imagine a lot of other valuable things. That's why you're in here looking for him, for hustlers frequent these premises daily, and nightly, and around the clock, if you know what I mean."



"No, I don't know what you mean," I cried, giving him a cold stare. "Jesse doesn't come to bars . . . bars like this."

They both laughed again.

"Oh, he doesn't does he!" the man replied, his falsetto voice rising to a ridiculous pitch. "My dear misinformed beauty. If you'll pardon the expression, they'll drop their drawers to a man as soon as they will to a woman. Makes no difference, since it's all for money. They simply make me sick. And they are all the same, cut from the same piece of rotten shit, whether they ride a motorcycle, a racing car, a football star, wear tough leather jackets and boots, making it like a real he-man, they're all the same. Boys selling their boxes like girls, and all the while they're selling it they are bragging what men they are, how many girls they've screwed. Talking about mixed up. The hustlers in this mangy town are more mixed up than the gays. At least a gay knows what he wants, and a hustler never knows what he wants really. Sick! Sick! Sick! If you were a man, my dear, it would make no difference to this Jesse fellow, whom I haven't met yet. God! and I thought I had tricked them all. So long as you hand him out ready cash, clothes, your car. You stop doing that then see how quick he drops you. I bet he'd even drop you for a man, if a man offered him more."

I left the lounge in a flurry of emotions. I just couldn't—I wouldn't believe, refused to believe that Jesse was like that. That old man was nothing but a silly drunk, spouting off his mouth, as if he knew it all. Jesse was too much man, far too masculine to go for anything so

unnatural to his maleness, even if it was second best. But this thought now, this unveiling of still confusing elements about his personality, invaded my mind along with my other worries, and I was so confused, so overwrought by nerves and lack of patience I walked the noisy, crowded streets like one in a dream.

Jesse! my heart cried again and again, frantically, blinding me with tears. Jesse! Where was Jesse!

Winter was coming on, and I had always hated winter. So had Jesse, and as I turned into the wrought-iron gates and into the patio the leaves were falling like rain, and there was a dark overcast to the sky, and geese were honking their way southward.

At the steps leading to my apartment I suddenly stopped, clutched at my heart as a sharp pain stabbed my side.

His motorcycle was missing!

At the sight of that empty place beside the stair rail I went sick inside. I knew what that shiny instrument meant to Jesse. And even if he did have my car, was off probably with another girl, maybe in the bed with her, my thought now, and my only concern, was to get it safely back for him. Automatically I linked its missing to those deplorable punks who had tried to beat him so mercilessly, and, running up the stairs, I immediately called the police.

Now, there was nothing I could do but wait and hope. Another worry to add further to my overwrought nerves, my misery. I paced the floor. A hundred times I picked up a pencil, started to lay out a floor scene on my drawing



board, then tossed it aside. A hundred times I went to my typewriting desk, stuck a clean sheet of paper into my typewriter, sat there for half an hour, my mind blank, then ripped out the paper, tossed it into the wastepaper basket. That night I lay on my bed in a pool of sweat, my head throbbing ceaselessly, my stomach twitching into hard knots. The next morning the police informed me that they had found the motorcycle. It had been dragged no more than a block from my apartment, in between two buildings near the capitol. It had been stripped. The back wheel, the battery, the chain, the buddy foot rests, the gas tank cap, the spark plugs, the front light.

I became physically sick when I saw it there sunken in the grass like a dead animal with its back broken, and I knew that Jesse would be even sicker than I if he saw it in this sad condition. Immediately I called Gonzales' repair shop and had it trucked in, and requested of the manager that he repair it as soon as possible. I walked back to my apartment through a misty rain, not caring any longer, my heart having ached until it could ache no more. I felt numb, thawed of my old torments, my impatient desperation. I took a hot shower, fixed my hair, made a sandwich and hot cocoa, and sat down to write on my book. I was doing a novel on the Mississippi Indians, and I had patterned the Indian hero after Jesse. So writing about him made me miss him a little less, and to consider him in a more attractive light than that of drinking and fighting and gulling me. I also described his body vividly, and this too dulled the pain in

my heart and lifted the worry from my mind.

I was still typing at eleven that night when I heard his key in the lock. He came in very slowly. He had worn his canary yellow sports coat, a wine-colored shirt and black slacks, and they looked as if he had slept in them for a week. His dark hair was in wind blown tangles, and he looked weary about the eyes, his expression that of strain, of fatigue. He came to the bedroom door, parted the wooden beads strung on cords, and just stood looking at me.

"See how you do me?" he said then, smiling a faint, tired smile. His eyes looked tired too, but they tried to twinkle, and rising, I went to him and smiled back. I was so glad to see him I wanted to hug his neck, to hold him forever and never again allow him to leave my apartment. And I was angry with him to for going off for days without returning, and me not knowing where he was, who he was with, not even bothering to call.

"Jesse, where have you been?" I asked simply, my heart in my throat.

"Oh, here and there," he said, nonchalantly, as if he had done no more than take a walk around the block.

"Oh, where?" I cried, annoyed almost to the point of tears.

He gave me a cynical look, went to the closet and hung up his coat.

"To my brother's at Amite," he finally said, and so cool. Too cool to suit me.

"You're lying," I flung back. "You've been with some woman. That ... that black bitch Myrtle perhaps."



He grinned a nasty grin, which made me want to slap him.

"What's wrong, Lily, you not getting enough of my big dick?"

His voice, his tone, more than his words shocked me.

"You know I care for you more than just for that."

"That's all you think about, Lily," he said lighting a cigarette and switching on the T.V. "My big dick in your hot pussy. You're just jealous."

Angrily I switched off the T.V. before it could warm up.

"But you've had my car for days, Jesse. I've been worried. How did I know whether something might have happened, that you were in the hospital, or in jail. I couldn't call the police, for they'd think you had stolen it. I've been worried to death."

He grinned, puffed madly on his cigarette, as if he wanted to disappear under its cloud of smoke.

"But nothing did happen, did it, Lily?"

"But I was still worried! You might have called, at least!"

He stared absently across the room.

"Hell, Lily, you wasn't worried about the car. You know I drive safe. All you're worried about is this beautiful dick of mine, afraid some other girl is going to get it and not you."

"Or some man!" I flung back, before I thought.

Instantly, and with the agility of an animal he leaped from the bed, slapped me full across the face. The sound rang in the still room, as I

reeled back, saw a million stars.

"You fucking bitch!" he cried. "You bug hell out of me!"

"I just want us to be together," I said tearfully, when I had recovered from the shock of his blow.

"That's all you want, you bitch!" he shouted, his hands out wide, his palms up. "Laying here, day in and day out, fucking you around the clock. I hate being cooped up in this dump. I want to get out, get some fresh air. I want to do something but lay naked all the time, you pawing me, kissing me all over, playing around with me. You irritate the hell outa me!"

"Then why don't you leave?" I cried, going around the bed to where he stood glaring at me. "Why don't you find someone else who will give you money, clothes, a car, jewelry, anything you want?"

"Huh, don't you think I can't. I know plenty of people in this town who would be glad to pay for me. There's a lot of rooms in this town, Lily, and in them rooms there is always a bed, and in each bed usually a woman. I can make out. People are lucky to pay me."

"Like that first night I met you," I said coldly, wanting to hurt him as he had hurt me. "They were sure clamoring to pay for you that night, weren't they? All the ones I saw was that lousy broad you call Myrtle."

"You're jealous of her, aren't you, Lily?" he said, laughing.

"I hate her guts!"

"You're jealous of everything, Lily. My lips, my body, my dick, my balls, jealous of every



minute I'm not with you, thinking I am fucking someone else, jealous even of the air I breathe even if someone sits beside me, talks to me. You're jealous of everything. Why, even my wife didn't keep tabs on me like you do."

"Maybe that's why you lost her," I flung back hotly.

"What do you mean?"

"Neglect, Jesse. Taking her for granted, as you take me for granted."

"Shit! All you do is bitch, nag! nag! nag!" He jerked a jacket out of the closet. "I'm going riding. See you round, maybe."

He rushed like a flash to the front door. It was then that I told him about the motorcycle.

He dropped his hand from the door-knob, turned slowly and looked at me, his lower jaw dropped.

"They did all that," he said, his brow a furrow of wrinkles.

"I bet it was those boys who tried to beat you up at the Riviera," I said, as the heat of my anger cooled. I saw he was hurt by it, and his sad, little boy look, melted my heart.

"Lily," he said then, his voice filled with its usual passion. "Will you pay for my motor being fixed?"

"I've already seen to that," I said, proud that I was doing something to make him happy.

"I'm sorry we fussed," he said, coming directly to me and sweeping me into his arms. And kissing me warmly on the mouth, he said jokingly, dreamily: "See how you do me?" And added playfully, squeezing me tightly: "You little bitch."

### *Part III*

Because Jesse's personality was stronger than mine, because he was so purely physical, because the fiber of his mind was keener, more spiced with cunning, because he was basically more lustful, wistful, and harder within, he ran rampant over my emotions, using my deep and abiding love for him as a foil to get what he wanted.

Having gotten away with that first incident with my car, having his motorcycle repaired so effortlessly, Jesse began doing just as he pleased, and whenever he pleased, setting his own schedule, his own hours for departure and return.

It drove me mad.

He would leave at any hour of the day or night, explaining with any gullible excuse he could drum up, or no excuse whatsoever.

"I don't tell anybody what they can do, and I don't want anybody telling me what to do," he sized up in one phrase his inner philosophy. "They do what they please. I do what I please."

And he did just that. No matter what guile I employed, no matter how much I pleaded, begged, and planned, he went when the urge came.

"I'll give you the dick when I get back," he would say, as if that was all I wanted, all I cared about. I would take him at his word, and sometimes it would be a week before he returned,



with no explanation where he had been, who he was with, or what he had been doing. And he always returned dishevelled, worn, tired, filthy. And many times not wearing the clothes he had left with, but someone else's, leaving his clothes, the good ones I had bought him, in exchange for worn out jeans, torn and faded shirts. I needed a hired hand employed especially just to keep up with his things, see that they were properly laundered, cleaned, hung in their rightful places.

He lived with litter, there was absolutely no tidiness in his makeup. Things seemed to break in his presence. Clothes became damaged without incident, buttons torn off, zippers that would not zip, shoes and boots that were never shined, shirts and slacks torn and ripped for no reason, no purpose. Discord was his creed, and no one could have lived up to it as he did. Cigarettes fell out of trays. His place at the table looked like the eating place of a blood hound, caps and bottle tops were left unscrewed in the bathroom, towels and wash cloths were used to wipe away shoe polish, rings remained around the bath tub, faucets were left dripping, and soiled clothes were left where he pulled them off. A blind man could have followed his trail, and he seemed to take impish pleasure in doing everything he knew I disliked.

Yet, despite his lack of law and order in things, despite his childishness and waywardness, I think the qualities he lacked made me love him, want him more. His very indifference to me made me want him with an impatient exasperation. His lack of neatness was the exact opposite to my orderliness and this hurry-scurry attitude

of his, this boisterous demeanor, this robustness of spirit, of zest, made inroads into my weary emotions, demanding of my spirit everything which fatigued me more, drawing on my patience until my every nerve was flayed, then, when he had me so roiled in emotion, so keyed with strain and weariness, he would toss me on the bed, rip away my clothes, and take me in a welter of wild passion.

Too, now that he had all the money he needed, he drank more, and the drinking kept him out in the open, in the jungle of the streets, bar-hopping, whiling his days away at playing pool, his nights with loose women and fighting.

He became cock of the walk; a new motorcycle to ride in good weather, a Thunderbird convertible in bad, or whenever he wanted, beautiful clothes, jewelry, money, all the things his degenerate hustler friends wanted with a violent desperation but could not have. They envied him, and they hated him, in a fashion. Yet they remained his companions, brothers under the skin, their loyalty like the honor among thieves. Too, I think they feared him. He was a fighter, and they had seen him leave a fight the winner, his opponent out cold, often enough to respect that title.

He was a fighter, a lover, and one of the hardest, healthiest male specimens I had ever seen. He was kind, loyal, affectionate when he wanted to be and as aloof, as cold as a lizard the next instant after passion if he so chose. Sober, always considerate, drunk, a little malicious, uncertain of his emotions, prankish to the point of danger, reckless, and dangerous, so dangerous!



There were times, times when that certain siren song lured him into the city, the streets, the nightlife; going off on his motorcycle in the cold, the rain, when I felt I could endure him no longer, the horrid imposition he forced on my life . . . those long, awesome hours of waiting out his return, the worry of not knowing what he was doing when he was not with me, who he was with . . . was he sick or well? In jail or dead? Then I truly wanted to leave him.

But each time he went away, staying for days, he would return and would be so maddeningly warm, so lovable, always kidding with "see how you do me," that I would melt in his arms, forgive him anything.

Whatever he did, however he worried me, how slack then became his devotion to me, I remained loyal to him. I never went out unless with him, kept to my work, completing my novel and throwing myself immediately into another one.

Yet, as the days wore on, some of them gay, festive, some of them adorned with the beauty of his love, his savage lovemaking, some of them saddened by his crying spells and talking about his wife, his dead baby son, the season of holidays came in, and I knew I would have to leave him for awhile.

Thanksgiving approached, warm sunny days blending moodily into a hard cold spell, and since that Sunday night before that holiday Thursday, Jesse had been missing, having strayed on his motorcycle from the warm, heavenly fold I had tried to provide. He was to go downtown to pick up a carton of cigarettes

and the evening News, and now, on Wednesday morning he still had not come in. I was in agony. I wanted him to keep the apartment while I drove out of town to visit some of my kin, and I wanted to give him enough money to tide him over until I returned that following Sunday. I wrung my hands. I wept. I developed a splitting headache from so much worry no amount of aspirins would ease it. I packed my clothes, unpacked, then packed them again. I tried to read. One of my novels had come in from the publisher. I thumbed through it sparingly, loathing some of my deathless prose. Everything became tasteless, saltless food. I couldn't eat. I couldn't think, and when I did think it was about him; wondering if he were with another girl. And visions tormented me—visions of him lying naked in bed with her, doing to her the many wondrous, exciting things he did to me.

I was to leave that Wednesday morning around six. I put it off, hoping he would return before I left, hoping he would return in time to have a sex round with him in bed, his going away present to me, but he didn't show up. I sat beside the phone, waited, cried up to the last, desperate minute. At noon I put my suitcase in the car and drove out north on highway 67 heading for Mississippi. When I had gone through Scotlandville and was passing Leland College I saw him driving up behind me through my rearview mirror. He was motioning for me to slow down and stop. When I did, he drove his motor around to the side of the car and I rolled down the window.

"See how you do me," he cried, laughing a



hearty laugh, but I was too weary of mind to follow on the tide of his emotions.

"I've been so worried, Jesse," I said, so glad to see him alive that I was almost to the point of tears. "Where have you been?"

"Been fucking a couple of blondes," he answered, with tongue in cheek.

"Good," I said, trying not to be mad, for I realized he was joking. "I want you to be happy."

"Shit, Lily," he said, laughing. "You'd die if I fucked another girl, and you know it."

"Maybe," I replied, not really knowing just how I would ever manage to live through it. "But truly, where have you been this time? It is important to me, Jesse, and I want to know ... the truth, before I go home to my folks and worry myself out of a good time."

He looked away at the woods in their gaudy autumn colors, then down at the dark, grey pavement, as if deeply ashamed of what he had done and not wanting me to know it.

"I've been in jail, Lily," he answered finally.

"What for?"

"Some traffic tickets, and driving while drunk."

I gave him a surprised look.

"You drove that while you were drunk?"

He nodded, gripping the handlebars with a firm grip.

"You're going to get killed someday on that thing," I said to him, fearing the worst.

"Maybe it'll be the best thing that ever happened to me," he murmured sadly, squinting at the sun.

"What makes you say that?"

"Nothing to live for. Nobody loves me."

"I love you, Jesse."

"I know that," he whispered casually, as if it meant nothing to him. "I mean ... I mean my wife."

"If you love her so much, why don't you try and get her back?"

"She won't have me. That's why I get so drunk all the time, Lily. Don't care anymore. If I can't have her I want to get drunk, want to get in jail, want to die. For without her there is nothing to live for, nothing."

"You're taking the wrong attitude about this," I said, feeling so sorry for him that the agony reached down to my toes. I looked at him then, noticing his features, harsh in the glaring light of the sun. He was so pale, so drawn, looked so tired. Purple lines underscored his bloodshot eyes, glowed along his brow where he had been cut, the wound still not quite healed. His hair was dirty, unkempt, needed combing, and the scars from other fights, made themselves vividly evident in the intensified light. I noticed his hands, too, which held the cycle in check. They were dirty, gnarled, like an old man's, and they trembled oddly, almost weakly.

Reaching in my purse I withdrew some bills and thrust them into his hands.

"I hate to keep taking money from you, Lily," he said, almost in tears.

"Take it," I said. "Go to the apartment. Clean up. Rest. You need it, Jesse, really. You're trying to kill yourself—out all night, every night, a slow suicide. What are you trying to prove to yourself? What's out there in the darkness that



is so important that you keep searching for it day after day, night after night?"

"I don't know," he muttered, half under his breath. "Death, I guess. Maybe that's what I want to find . . . death."

"You sound so morbid Jesse," I whispered, thinking sadly how I could go on and live without him if something like that happened. "We're all going to die soon enough, without talking about it or wishing it. You have everything to live for. You're young, handsome, keen of mind."

"I don't have Jackie," he said, and it brought us to silence.

We just sat there for an infinite time saying nothing, our minds glued to the past, what the immediate future would bring, and even then, even though we were discussing death, I had no inkling that I would see him just a little while longer, alive.

"I've got to go now, baby," I whispered, leaning my head out of the car as he bent over his cycle and kissed me affectionately. "See you Sunday evening."

I did see him Sunday evening . . . drunk! He was sprawled in a dishevelled heap in the middle of my bed, his clothes still on, rumpled, soiled with mud, his face and arms bruised from another fight. All the lights were ablaze, the radio and T.V. on, a faucet running, the kitchen littered with food, the carpet, the chairs, the divans heaped with dirty clothes.

"Jesse, baby, I'm home," I said, sitting down on the bed beside him, brushing back his unruly hair. I was so glad to see him that tears of joy

welled up in my eyes.

"So? So what, you're home," was all he said, and this without affection, any sign of love.

I knew then that this had to end. That he had to give up drinking, his life in the streets, his homage to every honkytonk on the gold coast, or else something dreadful was going to happen. I was beginning to feel it. A dark shadow seemed to hang over our world, following us wherever we went, haunting us by day, a nightmare in our sleep. I had tried everything, and nothing had worked. I had tried talk, clothes, the car, money; had tried to make him into something grand, noble, something he wasn't. I saw that now. He was something else. He was not what I had dreamed he was. He was not the male Cinderella I had lifted up from the bed of ashes. His past was too strong for him to change, to fit into my ways. That was why he kept running back into the alleys of the night, seeking his counterparts, those like himself, his gaudy, filthy brothers of the night.

I was losing him, and the fact tore its way through my bleeding heart. I was losing him like sand sifting through my fingers, unless I did something for him, and quickly.

They were still in the process of filming "Hurry Sundown" and I had read in the local papers that they were seeking rural talent to play the part of roughnecks in several fight scenes. I figured Jesse would like that, so I paid a visit to the cameraman I had known for several years. A great number of movies had been filmed in Louisiana, partially due to its ideal climate, its wealth of pastoral landscapes and ante-



bellum homes. And it was said that it was the only state in the South which listed actors in its unemployment agencies.

"If you'll just try and go straight," I said to Jesse, when I had already lined up an interview for him. "if only you'll stop your drinking, running around these honkytonks at night, I'll get you a part in the movie, not a big part, but one you'll like."

He was elated.

"I promise you I'll never drink again," he said, eager as a child. "If you will give me this start, put me back on my feet."

The morning of the interview I gave him a hundred dollars to buy clothes, and asked him to meet me and the director on the set at three that afternoon. They were in the process of filming in an area directly south of L.S.U. campus, so I let him use the car.

He didn't show.

"Well, looks like your handsome Adonis is already possessed of the temperament of show people," said the director, who did not appear too disappointed. "Late for work—the privilege for veteran actors only. Whats the matter ... he too good for us?"

I couldn't answer. I returned to the apartment sick in both heart and mind. Nothing was ever going to work with Jesse and me. And I loved him so desperately, and wanted to keep him for my very own. He was slipping away from me by the hour, and I fought this with desperation and with a hollow desolation in my heart. I realized my body, my sex, even my love wasn't enough to hold him. Jackie had him bottled up, his body,

his love, even his soul.

He was nothing but a shell without her. He was all the things he was because of her, all the things he wasn't because of her. He had become what he was now, too, because he had lost her. He was no longer a man with a man's reason and logic. He was but beauty walking in mystery and misery, doomed by his great undying love for his wife.

I didn't stand a chance. I knew that now. I had never stood a chance, and as I went home that cold, wintery day I looked back over it all, saw how he had used me, how I had become a foil he had applied to a purpose, his own desperate purpose. I had been the cure for his kind of sickness. I had been easy to use for I was easy to love. I had gone to him with a lonely, broken heart; loving him because he was alone, lonely in a dark forbidding world, and also with a broken marriage, a broken world. And he had taken my love and my loneliness, mixing it with his loneliness, and all the taken-for-granted beauty of our relationship had become a dirty, profane thing.

Yet I still loved him to distraction. And I still wanted him, as he was, drunken or not, a hustler or not, a man or not. I still wanted him with all the passion of my womanhood, even though now I had only the frailest hope of pulling him out of the gutter, out of the mire and the darkness and into the light of new ways, new dreams.

The apartment seemed so empty, so forlorn when I went in, an almost forbidding place and, flinging myself on the enormous bed, I cried like a child.



Late that night he came in. I could hear him fumbling with the lock and I knew he had been drinking. I sat up in bed, waiting with my heart in my throat until he felt his way through the dark living room and into the bedroom where I had turned on the red bedside lamps.

"See how you do me?" he muttered drunkenly, as he stumbled around the bed to where I sat up, looking angrily at him. Then, as if by slight of hand he withdrew a pistol from his hip, flipped back the safety catch. I almost leaped out of bed.

"Don't point that horrible thing at me!" I cried, frantically. I pulled the spread up around me, all the way to my chin, as if it would protect me.

He laughed a loud, gruesome laugh, and did just the opposite of what I asked. He pointed the pistol directly at my head.

"Do you love me, Lily?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, baby, I love you," I answered, my voice trembling so I could hardly get out the words.

"No you don't," he cried bitterly. "Nobody loves me. Nobody loves me."

"I do love you, baby," I muttered, moving out of range.

"I came here to kill myself, Lily," he said softly, slowly, as if he hated to say it but must.

"Then maybe you . . . maybe I'll kill you."

"But why?" I cried. "Baby . . . why?"

"Cause nobody loves me, no fucking body loves me."

He fell across the bed, his legs sprawled, his hands behind his head, the pistol barrel pointed

at his brow. He began to sob, long jerking sobs that ripped through my trembling heart, the tears in wild streams running down each side of his face. He looked so white there, his pale face against the gaudy multi-colored pillows, his hair in damp mats about his ears, his lips white, colorless, his eyes narrowed. Even the scars on his face were boldly pronounced, standing out with a vivid harshness I had never seen before.

"Baby, give me the gun," I said, trying to persuade him, fearful of every moment that he would pull the trigger, end his life, maybe mine. "We'll talk, we'll lie and talk about your wife all night if you want to. You can tell me everything. Then you'll feel better."

"Naw," he cried back, sobbing so that his whole body shook. "Don't want to talk about her. She don't love me. Nobody loves me. I'm no fucking good. Do you hear, Lily . . . ? No fucking good."

"Yes you are, Jesse," I said, my own eyes filling with tears. And I kissed him on the cheek. "You're not what you think you are. You're just unhappy now, tonight. Tomorrow? Tomorrow you'll feel better, will want to live again."

"No fucking good, Lily," he sobbed on, his lower lip quivering, the saliva running out of the corners of his mouth. "I fucked up today, Lily, fucked up good. I wanted to go out there, honest. I wanted that part, but Jackie . . . I took a drink, got to thinking about her. She won't love me, Lily. Won't have nothing to do with me. What am I going to do, if she don't want me any more?"

"We'll go on and live," I said, and with all the



meaning I could muster, my eyes watching frantically as he toyed with the cocked pistol, placing it between his eyes, under his chin, jabbed it into his stomach.

"I don't want to live," he said, choking. He sniffed like a naughty child. "I'm going to kill myself, now, on this purty bed. You don't love me, Lily. Jackie don't love me. Nobody loves me."

"Baby, please . . . please!" I begged, my heart heaving against my breasts, my nerves frayed. I lifted his head, cradled him in my arms, pressed back his entangled hair. "I can't live without you, Jesse. You know that. If something happened to you I wouldn't want to live. So don't, please don't. Put up the pistol, or give it to me, before it might go off accidentally."

"It scares you, don't it?" he said, and tried a vain attempt at smiling. Then he broke out in a rash of fresh tears, his face reddening now, his lips moving insanely. "Lily, Lily, are you going to write that book about me you promised you was going to write?"

I nodded, thinking now that he was really going to kill himself. He raised the pistol to his right ear.

"Tell Jackie in it that I love her, will you? So she'll know. I want her to read it, Lily, so she'll know. Promise?"

"Yes, baby, I promise," I said, sobbing too now, holding him close, hoping to never let go. "And I'll say how beautiful you are and how kind you are to me, and how happy you've made me. I'll say all that, Jesse, and more, much more, everything."

He stopped crying then, and I wiped the tears from his pale, lifeless face.

"I can't do it, Lily," he said, staring at the ceiling. "I'm a damn coward. I just can't do it." He looked around the room, as if for the last time, and this frightened me a little, even though I fell back with relief as he put the pistol back on safety. He got up, walked around the room, came back to the bed, looked down at the sunken place where he had lain.

"I'm glad ... glad I didn't do it there," he said, his eyes gutted with agony. "Not on your bed, Lily, but somewhere else. Gotta do it somewhere else."

He wheeled then, almost falling down in his drunkenness, and rushed round the bed to the door.

"Goodbye, Lily," he cried, as he rushed through the strung beads in the doorway.

I leaped up from the bed at the sound of that one awesome word, my heart pounding frantically, my whole body quivering with fright.

"Baby, don't go!" I half-screamed, running after him.

He stood for a moment in the middle of the living room, looked around the walls at the paintings, the statues, then out into the darkness. I heard the sound of his motor, the shrieking of the wheels as he roared through the courtyard and out into the street. It droned north, and I knew where he was headed. The Riviera!

I threw my canary yellow trench coat over my shoulders, grabbed up my purse and bounded down the steps to my car. Like a wild woman I backed back, struck the mortar railing around



the pool, and then with a jerk, as if on springs, out into the street. I had to catch him, I knew, had to stop him before he killed himself with the pistol or the motorcycle. He was drunk! Insanely drunk! Drunk on whiskey and his love for his wife!

God! I've got to stop him!

It was all coming to a climax tonight. I could sense it, could feel it in my every throbbing nerve. Almost of premonition I knew it could not last, not like this, not this torment and agony and love's privation. It was going to affect me and Jackie and him in some kind of despairing way and, as I thought these awful things, my foot automatically pressed harder on the accelerator, my brain crying in a ferment: Hurry! Hurry!

The ever-circling wheels of birth, mating, death, so all-absorbing to most women, were as nothing to me since I met Jesse. Freedom, sexual pleasures, discoveries about him, his body, his little secret additions to his wayward, forceful personality, the salvage of my pity, my love for him, my deep and beautiful love for him ... these to me were the great realities.

I had a deeper fear, too, than most people about death and any kind of violence or pain for my self or for anyone I loved. My idea of God had always been shadowy, but now, fleeing through the night to save the only person in the world whom I truly loved, it now took the shape of a kind of omnipotent Jesse.

The night was filled with wind, whirling leaves and old newspapers and filth over the driven streets, and the dark purple clouds brooded

despairingly, threatening to bring a storm. In the west, the moon hung like a watchful, piercing eye, and as my car began to take the steady rise up the long ramp of the Mississippi River bridge, I could see Jesse far up ahead. He had already reached the peak of the bridge now, and was going over the other side, down, down into the neon-lit goldcoast and into the crazy, debauchery which called to him, beckoned, laying its filthy hands on his life, his world, his ultimate doom.

Like Charon rowing his boat into the lower world of hell, so was this shiny, glittering cycle taking Jesse into the pit of iniquity, a world which had beguiled him, which had branded him with a claim no love, no power could break. He was married to the night, the life of the streets, the jungle of concrete and stone and colored lights, prowling the numerous caverns and caves like a king. The night was his mistress, the Riviera club his temple, and he was on his way to pay homage, to bow before the invincible.

Reaching the club, I wheeled in recklessly, throwing waves of loose gravel, and without bothering to lock the car, got out. His motorcycle stood parked to one side, desolately alone. I gave it one sad look, then hurried into the club. But no sooner had I reached the door than a flood of people were flushed out like the inmates of an insane asylum. They scattered, both men and women; and screams and yells rent the air. They pushed and shoved me out of the way, the girls shrieking, the men cursing. Then down the narrow red-lit hall came Jesse. He had hold of Jackie's hand, trying to drag her with him, and a



squad of enraged boys were following. They reeked with drunkenness and violence, their fists clenched, their eyes like hot glass, and one of them held a long switch blade which trapped the light, gleamed eerily in the half-darkness.

At that frightening sight the breath left my lungs. One thought burned itself deep into my brain. To save Jesse! But how?

He was headed for his motor, and his wife, lagging, was pleading with him, begging him not to go.

"You're drunk, Jesse," she cried desperately, her long dark hair in wild sails about her face. "You'll kill yourself!"

"Please, baby, come with me," he was crying, the tears running in frantic streams down his face, dripping off the end of his chin.

"I won't! I won't!" she yelled back, recoiling with all the strength in her body. They struggled there in the darkness and the wind, he pulling, she resisting. It was a terrible sight. Two lost people in the throes of love, both loving desperately, both battling a chaos neither understood. Wild and drunken and free, and as I stood muted to the spot, no part of this struggle now, lost to his life, his love, I felt deeply sorry for them both.

As in a boat's wake, the howling mob followed them to the motorcycle, yelling, cursing; feminine voices uplifted in hysterical screams. The punks, the same ones I recognized from that awesome, blood-drenched fight, moved in menacingly. And here they brought him to bay. They closed in on him like madmen, like howling, yelping wolves, clamorous for blood.

Amid the clapping of wild voices, the dark shapes moving like horrible shadows in the wind, fists shot out, bodies lunged crazily, in drunken frenzy, and Jesse, my beautiful Jesse, was in the middle of them. He fought like Samson, using the butt of his pistol as Samson had used the jawbone of an ass. Screams rent the wind-driven darkness, and blood gushed like tapped springs. A knife gleamed, made a wide silver arc in the moving shadows, slicing the night, as I let out a piercing scream. Like a silent arrow shot from nowhere, soundless, it buried itself in Jesse's side. He bent, dropped his weapon, clutched wildly, as the blood streamed through his long, tapering fingers, ran in red streams down his quivering leg. The knife struck again, when he was off-guard, digging into his chest like fangs, and he dropped to one knee.

Then, as if blind to all pain, all agony, his strength becoming something like that of super-human ferocity, he leaped up, swung his fists like enormous clubs. Bone struck bone. There were dull sounding thuds, screams, yells. Bodies fell in the loose gravel, moaning, crumbled heaps of flesh and flowing blood.

With all the strength in my body slipping away, I looked at Jesse standing there in the middle, in that clearing he had made, supreme. He was in agony I know, and I longed to rush to him, to take him in my arms, to find some way to get him to safety, but I could only stand by, helpless, and see it through to the end.

For now, when it was too late, I truly loved him. Not with any love of earth, of his beautiful body: that was spoiled for me, for I saw now how



desperately he loved Jackie, but with a grave amorousness of the saints. I felt for him now the passion that the Magdalen might have felt for Christ when she saw him nailed to the cross. Jesse was being crucified before my very eyes, drenched in a blood-bath of agony and violence and, like Magdalen before Christ, all I could do was stand before him and pray, for it was yet a man's world, and these desperate, violent men, crazy on drunkenness and lust, starved for the sight of blood, had already set the game.

Jesse let out agonizing moans. At first, the sounds were only a rumor, as if some evil thing, imprisoned for the safety of the world, whined and struggled against love in a close underground cavern.

I began to sob, and I noticed that Jackie, his wife, was sobbing too.

The beaten punks, grabbing up the ones that had fallen, rushed to a car, piled in like sodden rags. The motor gunned, lights flashed crazily, as the car spun around, came to a screeching halt.

One of the boys, his face smeared with blood, stuck his head out the door.

"We'll be back, Jesse, you motherfucker! With a gun!"

They were off in a rush, gravel flying, the motor straining as gears shifted, as metal ate against metal.

"I'll get them! I'll get them!" Jesse half-screamed, reeling drunkenly, having lost a lot of blood. He stumbled to his motor, straddled it.

Simultaneously Jackie and I rushed to his side, clung to him like wild women, begging him not to go off in his condition.

"Please, Jesse!" I cried, holding to his hand which gripped the bars in a steel-like grip. "You'll hurt yourself, maybe get killed, kill someone else!"

He flung out an arm venomously, shoved me backwards. I fell into the loose gravel. His motor racketed wildly, like a bellowing animal. He flipped on the orange-red lights, shot out of the parking area like a demon out of hell, with Jackie running after him. He roared onto the highway, sped east in the direction the car loaded with punks had gone.

Jackie fell in a heap on the gravel, sobbing bitterly. The night wind, playing havoc now, mixed with sand and filth, roamed through her long dark hair, lifted each strand until it was a mass of darkness, wild as her nerves and her grieving heart.

I ran to her, lifted her up by the shoulders. Her face was streaked with dirt, and the tears had stained her cheeks with mud.

"I gotta catch him!" she sobbed, over and over, her eyes on mine wild, frantic, torn with livid agony. "I gotta save him! I just gotta!"

"Come, honey," I said in a pleading voice, urgent, as time was running out for us both. "We'll go in my car."

Willingly, obediently she rose and I helped her into the front seat and slammed the door. Nervously I fumbled with the keys, shaking all over, my one distracted motive ... to save Jesse if I could.

We hurried down the highway in silence, she with muffled, broken sobs, her face buried in her hands, her long hair in dark tangles, I with the



muted obstinacy to keep my head, to remain as calm as my dishevelled nerves would allow, as my every emotion, every vein and muscle stood to the ready, heightened and sharpened by the role I must play, if I were to save Jesse at all.

And as we went, the wheels revolving monotonously, one word beat itself into my mind: Jesse . . . Jesse . . . Jesse.

Whatever Jackie and I had been in the past, rivals, enemies of a nature, we were friends momentarily, loving the same man and, in loving him to distraction, our one aim was to save him. If we had been jealous of one another, we were no longer, not now, not tonight. For Jesse's sake we had signed a silent truce. We both loved him, adored him, and one understood the other's feelings. We knew what agonies burned in the other's heart, and that made us for the moment closer than any friends.

Careful to keep Jesse and his cycle in sight, even though a number of cars kept weaving in and out between him, I grew alarmed when he turned off on a side street heading south into Port Allen, and not following the route over the bridge and back into Baton Rouge.

"He's following them," said his wife, when I mentioned it nervously to her. "There'll be another fight, when he catches them."

I went faint at this, and pressed harder on the accelerator.

I was gaining on him finally, and my heart eased somewhat its rapid pounding, but beat again with greater intensity when I saw that he turned again left, taking the middle span of the recently constructed approach to the new Missis-

issippi river bridge.

"Why, he thinks that's the old bridge," I half-screamed, as I guided my car up and onto the same ramp, following as closely behind him as my speed would allow.

"Oh, my God!" cried Jackie, bringing her hands to her face. "It hasn't been completed yet. The—the middle span hasn't been put in. He'll go over! He'll go over!"

She screamed then, the sound of her voice like the wail of the vanquished and, suddenly becoming aware of it, what would happen if he didn't slow up in time, a cold shudder ran down my spine. One picture burned itself on my brain in blood and agony, one sound was in my ears—the shrieking of the damned. The death that Jesse would die, unless I could save him, drowned out all other sights and sounds. The world was black, driven on by the wind, and the moonlight on the silvery rails of the new bridge gleamed like the bared fangs of a monster as Jesse went under them at high speed and onto the bridge itself.

There was no hope. I would never be able to reach him in time, to turn in sharply and cut him off before he plunged over the end and into the river, and the silvery floor of the bridge rose before me like the ascent to Calvary.

I could tell that he had lost a tremendous amount of blood, that he was weak, perhaps half-blinded by drunkenness and the wind, for his motor wobbled back and forth, and one time he almost fell off, caught himself, his arms becoming rigid.

Then, as if he saw but not in time enough to save himself, he steered the motor toward the



railing. The cycle shot out like a bullet, as metal ripped into metal, flinging Jesse off and onto the pavement. It bounced wildly, skipping through the air like a stone when it is thrown, then flew over the side. A moment later there was a loud splash.

Coming to a shrieking halt, I reined in where Jesse lay sprawled on the hard, cold pavement, careful that my headlights illuminated the area around and about him. Jackie leaped out, without slamming the door, and ran up to where he lay.

Slowly, I got out, knowing heartbrokenly that this was their moment, that I was to have no part in something so profound, so absolute. She knelt down beside him, sobbing pitifully. Slowly, reluctantly, I made my way up to them, stood back a little distant from where he lay. Every muscle, every tendon in my body shivered as I gazed at him lying there, his fine body mangled, drenched in dirt and blood. He was a broken heap, his body convulsed, his limp arms dangling as if broken in many places, his legs drawn up beneath him, they too were shapeless, formless in meaty pulps.

I let out a faint cry, as a cold shudder went through me like a raging wind. He was dying. Nothing could save him now.

He opened his eyes and fixed them feebly on Jackie, eyes now weak from loss of blood and weariness. His lips moved, parted, and he whispered faintly:

"Jackie . . . I love you . . . I . . . love . . . you."

She sank down over him, sobbing openly, her head on his chest, her long dark hair in fantastic

sails, tossed by the wintry wind.

Then, as if he were aware of my presence, he looked at me a long, painful look, a look that tore through my heart and to the back of my soul. He tried to smile, and lifted one hand accusingly.

"See . . . how you . . . do me?" he mumbled, as his mouth became filled with blood. I shrieked, let out tiny moans, began to sob as hysterically as Jackie.

Then, he was gone. He was gone into everlasting darkness.

Jackie rose up, stood mutely looking sadly down at him, her hands coiled together in front, this brave, courageous girl, her figure framed against the towering silver spires of the bridge, her dress blowing in billowing cascades, slapping against her shapely legs, as the wind howled itself out of the night.

I stood, watching them, thinking about small things that tortured my throbbing heart. He would never dance again nor laugh nor cry, nor would his fine body ever glow with passion and love, nor his eyes leap with mischief and delight, reckless, daring, filled with radiance and the gusty love of life. Never again would his sparkling motor feel the warmth of his thighs nor the steadiness of his hard hands on the bars. Never again would he blush nor smile shyly, like a small boy, and joke and kid, or snatch me into his arms saying, "give me a kiss, you bitch," nor flounder with me in bed, loving me, thrilling me.

"Jesse," I cried beneath my breath, as my heart heard and leaped frantically inside my breasts, and the sound of his name in the wind



driven darkness was awful and piercing, deep with unutterable horror, the voice of a soul driven mad by a lost love and torture.

Jesse!

The sound echoed in the freezing arches of the sky, and rolled back unanswered to the cold, desolate earth.

## *Epilogue*

The funeral was to be held at two o'clock that following afternoon, and there came a storm that early morning. Rain rustled on the windows of my apartment and the wind roared in the magnolias in the courtyard. The air was full of leaves, whirling, boiling, as in a caldron. From the streets and from the buildings, from the spire of the capitol to the river, came the roar of the vanquished.

But by noon the storm abated, the sun came out, and the naked limbs of the trees, black against the death gray sky, sparkled like diamonds.

I had never seen so many people at a funeral in my life. A stream almost a mile long filed into the cemetery, mostly made up of the very young and most of them girls around Jesse's and my age, people he had known and loved a little . . . in the honkytonks and bars and lounges scattered over Baton Rouge, and among them, surprisingly to me, were older men of station and rank, many of them prominent business men of the city. They filed by the casket in an endless stream, their faces drawn, white, dressed out in their Sunday best. And flowers! His grave was a mountain of red roses!

There were hundreds of wreaths too of pale lavender lillies, white carnations, asters, wound with fern and silken tulle. And giant urns of live fern and tropical plants, and miniature nosegays of violets and hot house orchids.

I dressed in despairing black, with a mourning



broach pinned above my breasts; a pin my mother had given me which had belonged to my great-grandmother. I went with a black wide-brimmed hat and veil, black gloves and purse, for I couldn't endure the sight of color, since Jesse had loved color so.

I parked my car within the entrance to the cemetery and made my way alone up to the gravesite, picking my way among the stately tombs. One of them had been uprooted by the early storm, smashed. It lay prone, and its fall had carried half the tomb away with it, so that it yawned darkly. A headstone lay in the path, and the text, which I read sadly, without mind, without emotion: "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection," was half obliterated. Looking up at the grave the world and everything in it seemed cold, hardened. In the bitter sunlight and the greenish mounds the cemetery took on an unreal quality, as if everything was built of wavering, vanishing material, and stood somewhere outside space on some pale, crumbling shore.

As if in a dream I heard the preacher's quiet, clannish voice, as the wind sifted through the dark cedars, as a bird sang in the top of a dead tree near the cemetery wall. Felt, almost ominously, a feeling of fatality, each time the steady breeze shook the black limbs of the tall shrubs and drops of water fell down on my hat, my shoulders like drops of fresh blood.

When it was over I went sadly back to my car, speaking to no one, waited until the enormous crowd had filed down the little path and out the wrought-iron gate, everyone

except Jackie.

She still stood on the knoll like a courageous huntress. She too was dressed in black, complete with mourning veil. She remained for a timeless time, dry-eyed, her face so white it was noticeable beneath the dark screen of her veil. Then, stooping, she broke off one of the red roses and made her way slowly, despairingly down the hill. When she got even with me she paused. Her eyes were bent on mine, shining silvery through her veil, but she said nothing.

She knew! God, I knew she knew!

Then, she moved on down the knoll and out of the gate to her car. A moment more and she sped west into the city, finally lost in the crowded distance.

I went back to the apartment.

And, looking round the rooms at all the signs of his love, I suddenly found unbearable the innocent stare of the things he had handled: the little tiny glass bubble he used for an ashtray, the Japanese ebony tray where he piled food and sat on the bed to eat while watching television, the bathroom with the toothpaste cap still unscrewed, his soiled clothes still flung carelessly on the floor of the closet, cigarette butts on the night table, one of his rings, his jewelry box filled with gaudy cuff links, his beautiful sports coats, shoes with the exact imprint of his feet moulded into their shiny contours, the stillness, the loneliness.

God! Now the loneliness!

Then I looked down at the bed, seeing, as if from a mad dream, from some other time, some other world, his dark, naked body lying prone,



one foot resting atop the other, his hands behind his head, a faint, little boy smile on his handsome face, his reckless black hair tumbling into his sparkling eyes.

I couldn't stay. I had to get out, away from the memory of him, away from everything in this apartment which reminded me sharply of him, his wonderful body, his love.

I drove, everywhere, anywhere. I came by the new bridge, sat there in the car for a numb moment looking up at the silvery structure, at the gap in the middle, my mind still unthawed on what had actually taken place, the fact that I had really lost him, that I would never see him nor make love to him again. I looked at the shining water directly below the gap in the bridge. It seemed so vast, so deep, so frightening, and I was glad it had not claimed Jesse's body, that he was buried in a cemetery where he rightfully belonged, so that I could visit his grave, take flowers ... and not at the bottom of the Mississippi River, his fine body rotting in the slime. I was glad, too, that his motor was still down there in the swirling brown depths. I never wanted to see it again, to be reminded of him who had looked so magnificent astride its glowing, iridescent metal. He had loved it more than anything on earth. It was his. And I was glad no one else would ever ride it but him. It was meant for his beautiful body, as he was meant for it.

And as I sat there in the car, gazing absently at the river, the foreign ships in the harbor, at the city sparkling in the clean sunlight, that pure silvery light always seen immediately after a storm, I began to hear the quiet tenor of his

voice saying things to me, some of them meaningful, serious, casual, words sometimes filled with laughter, ridicule, sadness, tears. And one phrase which kept coming back to me, invading my mind, torturing my sore heart.

"Lily, are you going to write that book about me you said you wanted to write?"

And I knew what I had to do. Knew what I must do, the last thing I could ever do for him.

I went back to the apartment.

So, I have lived it all again, this time on paper, the joys, the laughter, the tears, the maddening love, the worry, the despair, the agony—and too, the awesome loneliness.

God! the loneliness!

I have written it all down, just as he would have wanted it. I have written of his male beauty, his genius for lovemaking, the goodness, the brave honesty in him when sober, the malice, the wild violence in him when drunk, the way he really lived, his drive, the things he believed about himself, what he was, what he became because of a woman's love, and the desolate loss of that love. His ferocious strength, his male darkness, his terrible weaknesses, the beauty of himself as a young, virile man, full of wiles and mysterious wonders, before the torturing malformation of love, the tragedy of it, transformed him into the demon he was, a body without heart or soul, or, with so much heart he did not know which way to turn, loved by so many he became confused, bewildered, turning to drink as an escape . . . a beautiful, sexual pagan made into a wild urchin of the streets.

I have loved him, the best of him and the



worst, and I have lost him forever. But my fondest memories of him will never die, the memory of him when I first met him, the way he loved, the adoration I had for his handsome, naked body, possessed with him.

His memory is the only happy face that hangs over all my existence now, my broken mind, my terrible, terrible loneliness.

So Jesse is yours now. I am giving him to the world.

THE END

**MALE-ORIENTED NOVELS**

**\$1.25 each—we pay postage when you order  
any 4 for \$5 or any 8 for \$10**

- ☒ HOLLYWOOD HOMO by Michael Starr
- ☒ BRAZEN IMAGE by Carl Corley
- ☒ GAY WHORE by Jack Love
- ☒ QUEER GUISE by Mark Dunn
- ☒ GAY CRUISE by Carl Driver
- ☒ A LOVER MOURNED by Carl Corley
- ☒ GAY SADIST by Mark Dunn
- ☒ QUEENSTOWN COURT by R. G. Mayzk
- ☒ TO WANT A BOY by Bert Schrader
- ☒ SKY EYES by Carl Corley
- ☒ SATIN CHAPS by Carl Corley
- ☒ LIVE BAIT by Mark Dunn
- ☒ QUEER HUSTLER by Ed Culver
- ☒ GAY STUD'S TRIP by Bert Shrader

**\$1.00 EACH FOR THE FOLLOWING BOOKS  
(including 5c postage)**

- ☒ FALLEN EAGLE by Carl Corley
- ☒ FACES IN SECRET by Carl Corley
- ☒ MALE MODEL by Win Haven
- ☒ LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON by Dennis Drew
- ☒ MY SON, MY LOVER (anonymous)

- ☐ GAY TRILOGY, only \$2 including postage  
Three complete novels by Carl Corley
    - ☒ I. MY PURPLE WINTER
    - ☒ II. SCARLET LANTERN
    - ☒ III. A FOOL'S ADVICE

Free when you order \$5 worth of books from this page  
☐ GAY THREE-WAY by Ed Culver





#568, \$1.25

## MORE GREAT BOOKS!

Send for your  
free catalogue  
from  
**Trojan Book  
Service**

#419, \$1.25



#545, \$1.25



#487, \$1.25



#538, \$1.25



#542, \$1.25

Trojan Book Service offers  
you its latest catalogue—  
FREE! Hundreds of items to  
choose from . . . including  
the items at the left. Clip  
coupon below and mail to-  
day. We will rush your free  
catalogue of the finest in:

**NUDIST MAGAZINES  
PAPERBACKS  
MOVIES  
SPECIAL ITEMS**

Trojan Book Service, Box 2121-A, Phila., Pa. 19103



## TROJAN BOOK SERVICE

Please rush the items noted below:

☐ #568 ☐ #419 ☐ #538 ☐ #487 ☐ #542 ☐ #545

☐ Send all six books for just \$7.00

☐ Please send your free catalogue.  
(No purchase required.)

I have enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Handling \_\_\_\_\_ .25

5% tax, Pa. Res. \_\_\_\_\_

Total \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Box 2121-A, Phila., Pa. 19103

